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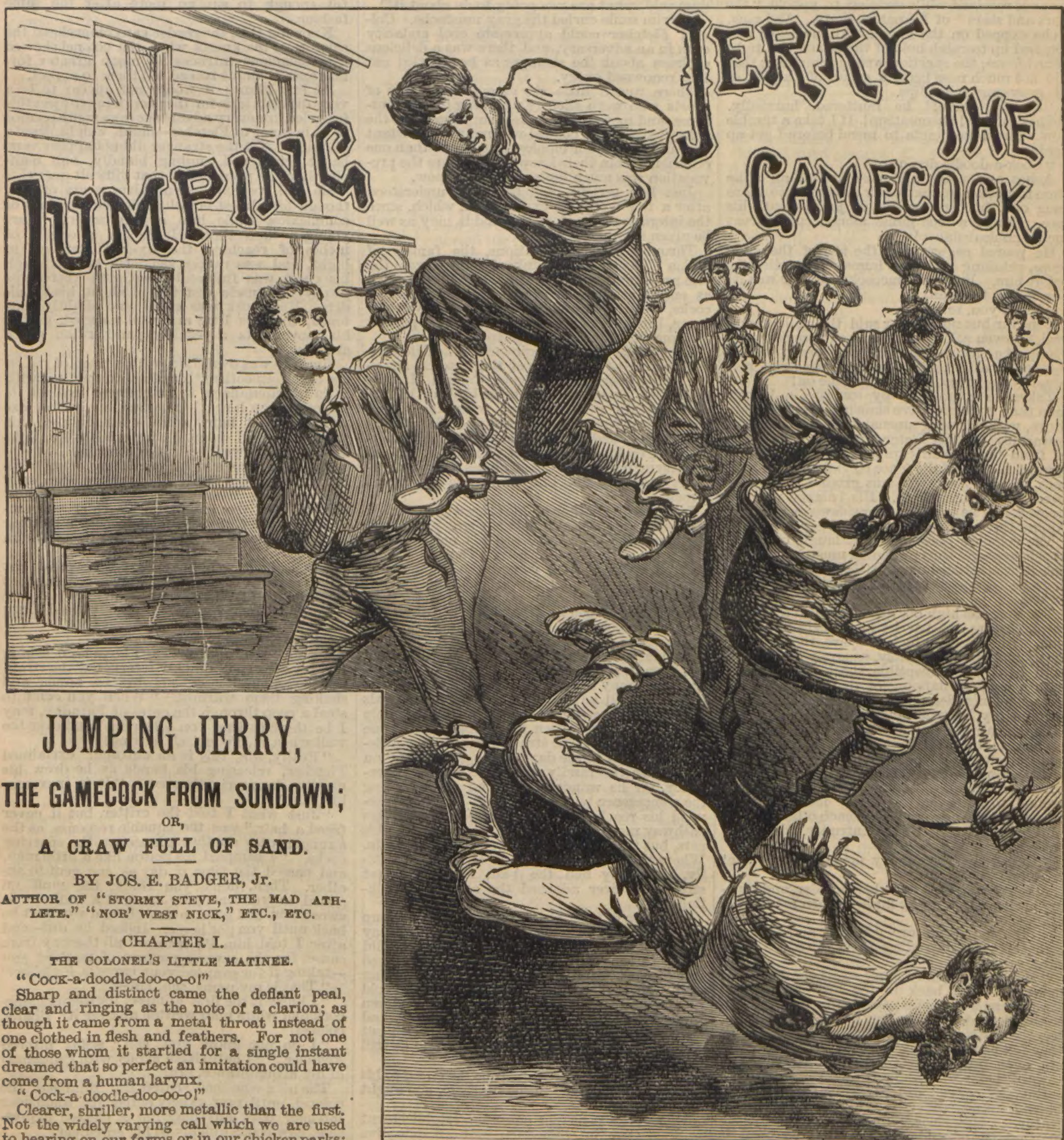
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JUMPING JERRY, THE GAMECOCK FROM SUNDOWN; OR, A CRAW FULL OF SAND.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, Jr.
AUTHOR OF "STORMY STEVE, THE MAD ATHLETE," "NOR' WEST NICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE COLONEL'S LITTLE MATINEE.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo-oo-o!"

Sharp and distinct came the defiant peal, clear and ringing as the note of a clarion; as though it came from a metal throat instead of one clothed in flesh and feathers. For not one of those whom it startled for a single instant dreamed that so perfect an imitation could have come from a human larynx.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo-oo-o!"

Clearer, shriller, more metallic than the first. Not the widely varying call which we are used to hearing on our farms or in our chicken parks; not the deep-throated crow of the gorgeously plumaged sultan in his harem; not the dogged,

THE GAMECOCK LEAPED HIGH INTO THE AIR, DOUBLING UP IN A BALL THAT SHOT DIRECT FOR THE FACES OF HIS TALLER ENEMIES.

sullen note of his defeated rival; not the cracked, uncertain treble of youth or old age; but the sharp, business-like defiance of a trained and practiced warrior—the slogan of the Gamecock!

Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher and his chosen guests threw up their heads with a startled air at the first crow, wonder, doubt and perplexity written on nearly every countenance. Not at the sound alone, for it or its like was familiar enough to their ears; even now came several sharp calls in answer to the first: but they came from the neatly kept pens at the rear of "The Pit," and not as the strange call had, from beyond the boundary.

"One of your pets got loose, colonel!"

"He'll be over the fence in a minute, red-hot!"

But the colonel shook his head decisively.

"It's none of my strain, though there's the genuine ring about it, too! It's wonderful, sah—wonderful!"

The ex-cavalryman was right; it was wonderful, all things considered; and as the second crow rung out so clearly, so business-like, the veteran forgot for the moment all else in his eager desire to solve the mystery.

"Lend me a leg, Dave!" he cried, excitedly, crossing the open space and casting an eager glance over his shoulder at the person addressed. "It's a gamecock, sure, and we'll have a little sport, if love or money—ugh—ah!"

Though young at heart as ever, Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher was growing old in years, and more than one joint was stiff from the effects of wounds received while striving to uphold "the bars and stars" of his native State. And now, as he stepped on the knee of Albino Dave and reached up to catch hold of the top of the tight board fence, the exertion wrung something that did not much miss being a groan of pain from his gray-mustached lips.

"Steady, Dave!" he muttered, hurriedly.

"That infernal rheumatism! If I take a tumble now there'll be joints to mend before I get up again. I'll be—"

"Cock-a-doodle-doo-oo-oo!"

Aches and pains and rheumatism all alike were forgotten as that clear clarion once more rung out, this time seemingly just beneath his face. Surely a true game alone could throat such a noble defiance!

He peered eagerly over the top of the close fence, catching sight of a human figure directly before him. But the gamecock? Where was it? Carried by the man?

"I say, you, sah—"

Thus far but no further said the gallant colonel, for even as the words shaped themselves on his lips, he saw the human figure rise in the air very much after the fashion of a gamecock, and come flying toward him, broadside on!

Taken so completely by surprise, a braver man than he might have shown signs of discomfiture, without being amenable to the charge of cowardice. Colonel Fletcher involuntarily dodged from the human catapult, striking his chin against the top of the fence so violently that the oath of angry surprise was ground to bits between his clashing teeth. His balance was destroyed, and he tumbled over sideways, bringing Albino Dave into an ungraceful heap with him.

The colonel's guests did not laugh, ludicrous as the spectacle thus presented must have been; but it was astonishment rather than reverence or respect for gray hairs that held their risibles locked.

For over the high board fence sailed a human form, passing the barrier in a horizontal position, with barely an inch to spare, then turning deftly and alighting safely, squarely on his feet, with hardly a perceptible shock. And then, with a comical flapping of the bent arms, the audacious intruder once more emitted that clear, peculiar cry, so true and faithful as to deceive even the pair of genuine gamecocks present.

Then, as though believing each that the other had sent forth that clear challenge, the noble birds again flew into the air, striking viciously with their muffled spurs. They came to the ground together and for a few moments were breasted, pecking savagely at each other, watched keenly, eagerly by the intruder, who cried out boldly:

"Henny the boss for my money, two to one! Who takes it?"

A heavy hand fell upon his shoulder, and turning his head he saw the flushed, stern face of the colonel.

"Who the deuce are you, sah, and by what right are you intruding here? Produce your card, sah!"

"Mebbe you think I can't—a whole deck, and never a marked back in the lot!" laughed the stranger as he tossed a pack of playing cards into the air so deftly that they seemed to be strung together by the edges, catching them again as they fell back as evenly as they rose, yet without even taking the trouble to cast a glance toward them.

But the colonel did not smile; instead, the black frown deepened upon his stern and rugged features. His sinewy fingers tightened their grip on the shoulder of the intruder until it seemed as though his finger tips would meet through the solid flesh; but the stranger did not

flinch or show the slightest sign of pain or fear. Instead, he still smiled blandly, his frank blue eyes sparkling, his red lips parting just sufficiently to afford a glimpse of white and even teeth beneath the yellow veil of hair.

The worthy colonel was hot and angry. His rheumatic bones ached from his ugly tumble, and his dignity felt even sorer. Then, to think he had been so egregiously fooled; that he, the old and experienced cock-fighter, should have been taken in by the cunning imitation of his favorite fowl by this featherless biped! It was abominable!

"Your buffoonery is as much out of place as your person, sah," he sternly uttered, his deep voice dangerous, his dark eyes glowing redly. "No gentleman would think of intruding where his presence is not desired. You came without an invitation; I now give you one to take your departure."

Just how it was accomplished, the colonel himself could not have explained, but the stranger stood free from his grasp, and that without showing any signs of having made a struggle to free himself. The smile was still upon his face, but the laughing light had left his blue eyes, and his voice was just a thought harder and less pleasant when he spoke:

"I reckon you're the high-cockolorum here, from the way you talk?"

"I am the proprietor, yes, sah," was the dignified reply.

"And I am an intruder?"

The colonel bowed stiffly.

"Well, as the never-to-be-lamented Tweedledum said, what are you going to do about it?"

A grim smile curled the gray mustache. Colonel Fletcher could appreciate cool audacity even in an adversary, and there was a delicious coolness about the stranger as he drawled out that renowned query.

There was a little stir among the party of sports who were silently watching for the outcome, and more than one felt surprised that the heavy hand of the colonel was not put to instant use, as it had been employed on more than one occasion within their knowledge, where the provocation was much less serious than now.

Just how serious, will be better understood after a few words of explanation, which, since the interests of the story demand it, may as well be given now and here.

Through many generations, the family of which Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher was the sole remaining representative, had been known as enthusiastic breeders and fighters of gamecocks, and the strain to which they gave their name, became known as dead-game and perfect gluttons when heeled and pitted.

Even while with his regiment in the field during those last few months of the hopeless struggle for Southern independence, Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher kept a few choice birds of his favorite strain with him, and when the "Lost Cause" was forever abandoned, though he found himself poor and penniless as had been the poorest slave on his once famous plantation, the ex-cavalryman clung to the strain as the most precious treasure left him amid the disastrous wreck.

Like many another of his class who accepted the situation with a quiet dignity, Colonel Fletcher felt obliged to leave his native State and seek a living elsewhere. Though battle-scarred and stiff with wounds, he could work, since he must work or starve; but he could not do so where he had once reigned lord of all he beheld. And when he departed, with him went a pair of cocks and a few hens of his loved strain.

Manual labor, his wounds growing stiff, would not permit, and for the first few years, the colonel saw many ups and downs of fortune; but through it all he kept his strain of game-fowls pure and uncrossed. Many a time did they help to fill his pockets when his stomach had gone empty for days. The strain became more widely known now in the days of his adversity than even when the family name was in the ascendancy, for he wandered far and wide, seeking the competence which seemed to hover just beyond his reach. He could have smoothed his pathway more easily by breeding and selling his pets, but that he could not bring himself to do. Where then would be the pet boast of the family, that they had the best, bravest, purest strain that ever adorned the annals of cock-fighting?

In course of time, Colonel Fletcher brought up in the mines of Colorado, and from the first day he struck the then hardly born camp of "Solid City," fortune smiled upon him, and gold poured into his coffers until they were full to running over. He still dreamed of returning to the old plantation—long since divided into a dozen small farms—and restoring it to what it had been before the war, in all but the slaves; but age and wounds were telling on him, and he still lingered.

In prosperity as in misfortune, he clung to his pet strain. He lived in and for them, one might almost say.

He ran the principal gambling establishment in Solid City, in connection with an extensive bar. Above the door hung an illuminated sign, lettered "The Pit," while carefully drawn and

colored by his own hands, were fighting gamecocks of his pet strain below the legend on the glass.

Back of "The Pit" was a roomy inclosure, surrounded by a high and tight board fence. In the center of this inclosure was a regulation pit for gamecocks, and sure as the Sabbath day came around, the colonel would invite a few particular friends to enjoy his weekly treat with him. With them he would retire to the pit, and with one of his faro dealers to handle in opposition to him, would match couple after couple of his birds together.

It was no longer a matter of business with him, since he had grown rich, and it was seldom that the colonel would wager even a cigar or a bottle of wine on the fights, though he had no objections to his guests going as far as they pleased in that respect. And his love for the birds was too great to let them do more than show their game qualities without serious injury to each other, their steel gaffs being covered to within a quarter of an inch of the point with snugly adjusted corks.

While thus engaged, no one was permitted to interrupt him or approach the inner pit without showing a written card of invitation to the bar-keeper. On one or two occasions, before the colonel was thoroughly understood by the rough citizens of the flourishing camp, attempts were made to break down this barrier, and then there was fun galore! Old and stiff though he might be, the ex-cavalryman proved himself a hard and desperate fighter, and those who escaped from the "circus" which followed, were careful enough to sin no more after the same fashion.

Knowing this, the reader can comprehend the surprise of his guests when the colonel showed this audacious intruder so much greater forbearance than his record led them to expect.

At first glance it would not appear to be a very difficult task for the proprietor to eject this intruder, for every advantage save youth seemed to be in favor of Fletcher—height, weight, length of reach. Yet the stranger did not appear very badly frightened, smiling blandly, half maliciously as he propounded that difficult query.

He had, perhaps, seen thirty years of life, though his almost boyish smile and clearness of complexion made him appear several years younger than that. He lacked a couple of inches of reaching the six-foot standard in height, and was rather slenderly built, though his chest was full and deep, and there was plenty of muscle distributed about his shoulders. His waist was small and slightly flattened, his legs long and well muscled, giving his movements a peculiar panther-like grace and ease.

His face was oval, fair, with a tinge of red on the cheeks smooth as that of a woman's, yet with little of effeminacy to be charged against it. His eyes were large, blue, sparkling, full of expression. His hair, worn close clipped, his mustaches and pointed imperial were light brown, almost yellow, soft and silken.

His garb was simple, consisting of soft felt hat, gray merino shirt, mouse-colored corduroy trousers and trim, well-fitted shoes of light leather. On the bosom of his shirt was embroidered in bright silk a gamecock in fighting attitude, trimmed and heeled after the orthodox fashion.

A belt of silk webbing encircled his waist, but if he carried weapons, they were in concealment for the present.

Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher paused long enough to note all this, then he replied:

"I have politely invited you—"

"Which is precisely what I have been fishing for, my dear sir!" quickly interposed the stranger, grasping the colonel by the hands and shaking them warmly. "When you come to steal a peep through the gates of Paradise, may I be there to lend you a helping hand over the wall when St. Peter isn't looking!"

"Really, sah, this is an outrage!" exclaimed Fletcher, releasing his hands as he drew his massive frame rigidly erect. "It is inexcusable, sah!"

"Just what I told the critter, but it never fazed a hair," was the equable response, as the stranger cast another glance at the sparring cocks. "I sampled his poison like a little man, and passed the time o' day as one gent to another. Then, don't you think, the muff on guard in yonder never cracked a smile as he swore you had gone to chu'ch, and wouldn't be back until you got home. Indeed he *did*—and after I told him I'd tramped all the way from sunset for the express purpose of meeting you—taking it for granted your name is Fletcher?"

"That is my name, sah, but—"

"I knew it the first glimpse, for there's gamecock and white man written all over it! Shake, colonel!"

"I do not know you, sah," stiffly uttered Fletcher. "I only shake hands with gentlemen of my acquaintance, sah!"

The man who had shared the tumble of the colonel, until now closely eying the audacious intruder with anything but a pleased expression, now spoke quickly to his employer:

"Say the word, colonel, an' I'll boost him out the same way he came in!"

The stranger flashed a swift glance over him, showing his white teeth a little as he retorted:

"You'll give me time enough to finish what I was saying, won't you, partner? Hairs as white as yours shouldn't be too hasty on the jump-off."

Albino Dave flushed until his handsome face was in startling contrast to the almost snowy whiteness of his hair, mustaches and imperial. His pinkish eyes turned almost red, and gleamed dangerously as they sought the stern face of his employer, silently repeating his request.

"As I was about to remark, when Daddy Whitehead broke in, the ungodly galoot in yonder fed me on guff until I really believed you had gone to Sunday-school or prayer-meeting or some such exercise, and so I left my card for you, saying I'd drop in later. I set out to see if I could trail down the Gospel-house, but hadn't taken more than a couple of tacks when I heard the music—thusly!" and once more pealed forth that admirable imitation of a pugnacious gamecock.

"It made me tingle with pure joy from claw to comb—it sent an electric thrill wabbling through every muscle until my hackle stood out like a starched ruff 'round the throat of a pretty school-girl when she gives her books the go-by and scatters bits of the dictionary all over an appreciative audience from the opera-house stage! Heaven, says I—or as nigh it as ever poor wings like mine will ever carry me! Let me get in, and the getting out can take care of itself."

"That's what I thought, colonel; what I did, you saw: just stepped over the paling without stopping for an invitation. Monstrous sorry I frightened you into taking a tumble, but, really, I couldn't well help it, since I was on the way before you showed your headlight. No bones broke I hope?" with a complete change of expression, his tone growing tenderly solicitous.

"No thanks to you, sah!" muttered Fletcher, hardly knowing how to take this curious being.

"Bless you, colonel, I don't ask any," frankly. "You're entirely welcome, and I'll do it all over ag'in ef you say so—after we watch the birds spar a bit. Pity they ain't better matched. The henny is too bright for the big 'un. Hellow!"

This was too much for the doughty colonel. To even dare hint that his sacredly bred and watched black-reds could possibly produce a henny! He overlooked the insult to himself as a breeder, in his feelings for the worse insulted birds, and striding forward he gathered them up in his arms, where they still pecked savagely at each other, striving to come together in battle once more.

"Don't choke 'em off on my account, colonel," added the intruder, seriously. "It's been so long since I saw a fight that two fluffy bantys pecking at each other would make my heart slop over like a tubful of joy! I don't take up much room. I don't ask for a reserved seat, nor yet a cushioned pew. My feet are plenty strong enough to stand alone, in this dry country, and if I'm intruding—"

"You are intruding, sah!" snapped the insulted breeder.

"Then throw me out."

Quietly the words were uttered, and the speaker smiled even more blandly than before, but there was something in both tone and manner that caused the assembled sports to glance one at the other. Then Albino Dave bluntly exclaimed:

"Harder things than that have been done, and can be done again, too!"

"I want to know!"

"And I'm just the lad that can prove it!" grated the white-haired sport, his nervy face hard-set, his athletic form springing upon the stranger. "Out you go—the way you came in—if it breaks your infernal neck!"

Every word he said was meant, too, but things failed to "pan out" exactly as he anticipated. With a cat-like leap and dexterous dodge the stranger avoided his dangerous rush, and when Albino Dave, brought up by the fence, whirled around to make another attempt, he was assailed in turn, though after an altogether different fashion.

With a piercing crow, the athlete leaped into the air, his feet drawn up until his knees touched his swelling chest, shooting straight for the faro dealer. Albino Dave saw this much, but before he could dodge or guard himself, he was struck senseless by the heels of his adversary, who deftly alighted on his feet, facing the sports, both hands slipping through side slits in his shirt. And the bulging cloth told them that each hand was armed with ferringier or revolver.

"One moment, gentlemen!" he cried, coolly. "Does any one of you bear the name of Perdue Flickinger?"

CHAPTER II.

THE GAMECOCK FROM SUNDOWN.

It was all done so swiftly that not one of those present had time to interfere, or even to grasp a weapon before the stranger had them "lined" with his "masked battery."

Albino Dave lay quivering at the base of the fence, sense and breath driven out of his body by those deftly delivered feet, one of which had landed on his throat with force enough almost

to break his neck, the other striking him in the pit of the stomach. A sort of froth, slightly tinged with blood, was oozing from his white lips, and he looked like one dead.

Perhaps it was quite as much the seemingly inconsequent question so sharply uttered by the stranger as his defiant attitude and the armed hands, that held the sports motionless for a space.

Keenly those blue eyes roved from face to face as though hoping to surprise the truth before it could be masked; but then the brows contracted and the red lips came firmly together as he saw naught but empty wonder there. His voice was sharper and harsher than it had been at any time since his first appearance as he added:

"I see the gentleman is not present, but that ain't saying he's a stranger to you all. Maybe some of you can tell me where I can find Perdue Flickinger?"

Still holding his precious gamecocks beneath his arms, Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher hastily uttered to those nearest him:

"Look to Dave, some of you. And you, sah," turning with a dark frown to the stranger, "want to understand that I permit no rowdiness on my premises. You have done more than enough harm already."

"Any worse than he tried to do?" quietly uttered the other, with a careless side nod toward the senseless sport. "Was I to stand still and permit him to pick me up like a bag of wool and toss me over the stockade? That may be manners, but I was raised in the woods, you know, and too big a dose of politeness might accidentally break my precious neck!"

"You brought it on yourself," was the cold, harsh reply. "Albino Dave is in my employ. He thought your impudent conduct was annoying me, and deemed it his duty to put a stop to it. Had he broken your neck, it would have been little more than your own fault."

"And it's my fault that his neck can get along without being welded. He lipped in and wanted to buckle with the Gamecock from Sundown. He asked for a fly, and he got it, I reckon. Bah! he's a runaway from Dunghill, or one touch with muffled gaffs, wouldn't make his feathers droop."

"You may yet find him a bird of good blood," grimly retorted the colonel. "Of one thing you may rest assured: if you feel at all aggrieved by his attack on you, Dave will give you all the code can call for. I pledge my word for him."

The stranger laughed shortly, with an amused air.

"Oh, I'm no swine! I feel perfectly satisfied as far as I've got, if he is! I could just as easily have broken his neck as put him to sleep, but I thought maybe you might object to having a funeral on your hands before church let out."

"I do object—to your presence here, uninvited, sah."

"If you wish it, I'll go," frankly. "You have treated me whiter than I had any right to expect, after taking such an uncereemonious fashion of introducing myself. I'll go without putting you to the trouble and expense of throwing me out. And for fear that knocked-out rooster may have some fellow-cocks who may like to try a fly or two to get even, I'll wait out at the bar for them and you, until this seance is over. Ta-ta!"

Doing his hat with a bow that had far more of respect than of ridicule or mockery in it, the strange fellow stepped back a pace or two, leaped forward, then rose from the ground as lightly as though suddenly inflated with gas, turning over on his left side until his figure was stretched out almost horizontally, shooting over the fence with a little to spare, and vanishing from view.

"So-long, gents!" his clear voice came floating across the barrier. "I'll see you later! Yours truly, Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown!"

Colonel Marmaduke could not maintain his dark frown. A bold, fearless man himself, he could appreciate those qualities in another, and this Jumping Jerry, as he gave his name, had shown no slight amount of "sand," mingled with his impudence in facing alone that gathering of sports.

"He's a new chief on the war-trail, I reckon," half-laughed one of the party. "I never saw or heard of him before."

"It was a level head that gave him his name, at all events," uttered another. "Did you ever see such leaping?"

"Never! and I can hardly believe my eyes as it is! I'd go my last ducat no living man could cross that fence with only dead level ground for a take-off. Why, it's good seven feet if an inch!"

"With half a hand on top of that!" nodded the colonel, then turning to the men who were looking after the stunned faro dealer.

As near as they could tell, no bones were broken, but all their efforts failed to restore Albino Dave's senses, and Colonel Fletcher bade them lift him up and carry him to his room above and to the rear of the card hall.

There was a certain degree of anxiety in his face and manner as the worthy colonel watched them carrying his orders into execution. Apart

from his liking for Albino Dave as a man and member of the fraternity of sports at large, the man with white hair and pink eyes was a very valuable servant for one in his situation.

In addition to his skill as a faro dealer, Albino Dave was cool and steady in the face of odds, and more than once his quiet but nervy manner had checked in its birth what had bade fair to prove a serious riot in the gambling room. Then, too, he knew how to trim and heel a gamecock, and the colonel felt that his particular pets were as safe under the handling of the albino as though they were in his own care.

Taking all this into consideration, together with the rankling remembrance of those slurring words uttered by the audacious stranger who had called himself Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown, and it is hardly to be wondered at that the battle-scarred cavalryman felt more repulsion for than attraction toward the airy sport from the Occident.

True to his parting declaration, Jumping Jerry was waiting in the bar-room when Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher and his little following came from seeing Albino Dave placed in bed.

When they entered he was leaning carelessly against the bar, his glib tongue wagging nimbly for the edification of the imperturbable bar-keeper, but instantly his manner and demeanor altered until he hardly seemed to be the same person as Colonel Fletcher drew near. With an easy grace he doffed his hat, making a slight bow before covering himself again, his voice smooth and even as he addressed the colonel.

"Good-evening, sir. Have I the honor of addressing Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher, proprietor of this establishment?"

"My name is Fletcher—yes sah," stiffly replied the ex-cavalryman, bowing lower than he might have done only for his inward resolve not to see the partially extended hand.

Jumping Jerry smiled a little, and though he made no comment, he quietly clasped his own hands and went through the motions of shaking all by himself. The amused spectators interchanged quiet glances. Colonel Fletcher flushed a trifle, bit his lip, and his dark eyes began to burn and glow, all the more vividly because his native politeness told him he was not altogether in the right thus far.

"You are the gentleman I have traveled many a long mile to meet, then," bowed Jumping Jerry, apparently unconscious of the effect of his silent reproof. "For lack of a better sponsor, permit me to introduce myself: Jeremiah Titus, from almost anywhere, and very much at your service, colonel!"

This time the colonel felt obliged to accept the proffered hand, though his grasp was anything but cordial. Somehow he felt as though this glib-tongued stranger was bull-dozing him into an acquaintance, and the unfavorable impression made by his first appearance was rapidly becoming confirmed.

"In what manner can I serve you, sah?" he asked, stiffly, this dislike conflicting with his natural courtesy.

"By joining me in a glass of your excellent liquor, sir," laughed Jumping Jerry, then nodding toward the rest of the party, his voice light and airy: "Gentlemen, will you keep us in countenance, and drink to our better acquaintance?"

There were some present who liked this dashing sport even less than did the colonel, but this was not violent enough to make them violate the laws of border politeness. A true sport never declines a gentlemanly invitation to indulge, without a sounder reason than personal dislike.

Those keen observers saw that Jumping Jerry, no matter how much he might be given to gasconading, was no heavy hitter of the bottle, for he barely covered the bottom of his glass, and daintily sipped even that. Neither this nor the gold which he carelessly pushed across the counter served to strengthen the opinion they had at first formed of him—that he was one of those devil-may-care human sponges so plentifully found in all mining-towns.

As in duty bound, the colonel motioned his barkeeper to renew the supply of liquor. Jumping Jerry was as delicate in his use of the fiery liquor as at first, afterward calling for cigars, one of which seemed far more to his liking.

These essential preliminaries over, the self-styled Gamecock grew a little more free and easy in tone and manner.

"From the South, I take it, colonel?" he said, with head on one side as he watched the tiny rings of blue smoke rising and widening.

"From South Ca'line, yes, sah—God bless her!"

The colonel raised his hat and lifted his eyes for an instant as the last words broke impulsively from his lips. He was a true Southerner, and never man loved his native State more fervently than this exile, self-imposed though that sentence was in his case.

"A dandy little State, and can beat the world—almost—at cock-fighting," cried Jumping Jerry, with almost too much fervor.

"You are not from there?" half-asserted, half-questioned Fletcher. "Not from South Ca'line?"

"Well, no—not exactly, though I first saw light south of the line that—"

The colonel caught him by the hand and shook it vigorously, much as he might at unexpectedly meeting a long-lost blood relative. He was cordial enough now, at all events.

"My dear, sir! why didn't you say so before? It makes my old heart bubble right over with delight to meet a fellow Southerner in this god-forsaken country! You must join me in another, sah! In a dozen, if you can hold as many, sah!"

"You don't like the Kanucks, then, colonel?"

"Eh? the Kanucks? I don't fully grasp your meaning, sah," uttered the perplexed Southerner.

"When I said I first saw light south of the line—"

"Mason and Dixon's, of course?"

"I meant the Canadian boundary," quietly added Jerry, not even the ghost of a smile betraying his secret appreciation of the supreme disgust written on every line of those strong, dark features as the colonel hastily motioned his bar-keeper to replace the bottles he had produced.

"An infernal Yankee!" he growled. "And I took you for a southern gentleman, sah!"

"Well, we hardly recognize the Yankee part of it, in good little, tight little Delaware," coolly retorted Jumping Jerry. "Blue Hen's Chickens sounds better, and comes a little nearer the mark. We're not enormous as to size, nor tremendous as to numbers, but when it comes down to the pure gitting-thar, we're pretty generally found somewhere near the first flight. And as to gamecocks—why we originated the term and breed, from shawl-neck to duckwing, from red to white, and pile to henny!"

Stiff and erect, his dark face flushed, his eyes glowing with injured pride and mortification, Colonel Fletcher listened until Jumping Jerry concluded his outburst, then said:

"You spoke of having business with me, sah. Will you oblige me by making that business known at once?"

"Now you hit me right where I live when I'm at home, colonel," and Jumping Jerry assumed a strong down-east twang with all the skill of an accomplished actor. "If there is any one point on which I flatter myself I'm boss, it is that of being a man of business, pure and simple. I drew it in with my mother's milk, and I—"

He could not help breaking off in a hearty laugh at the expression of weary disgust that came over the strong face of the ex-cavalryman, and as the colonel flashed an angry glance into his merry face, he bowed, apologetically, saying:

"I beg your pardon, colonel, and am willing to call it square, if you are. There's as good men south as north of the old debatable line, and you, as a veteran soldier who fought for what you deemed your rights while the ghost of a hope of success remained, should be the last to dispute that assertion when its terms are reversed. There is no North and South, now. It is one country, and we are all Americans. United, we can whip the world, and a good portion of the infernal regions thrown in as make-weight, to boot! You fought on one side, and I, as a drummer boy, did the best I knew how on the other. But those days are gone, never to come back again, so why should you and I growl and snap our teeth at each other, simply because nature saw fit to give us breath on opposite sides of an imaginary line?"

"You spoke of business, sah, I believe?" coldly uttered the colonel, still overlooking the proffered hand.

Jumping Jerry laughed shortly, tossing his head back with a recklessly defiant air, his voice ringing out clear and distinct, more like the tones used while intruding within the sacred precincts of the inner pit.

"Business she am, old cock, and since you're so mighty particular about pedigree, here's mine: I'm Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown. I'm a shawl-necked chicken from Gritty Gulch, trimmed, heeled and ready for a fly at any game from a hummingbird to a roc! I can crow louder, jump further, gaff keener and stick to work longer than any biped, with or without feathers, that the good sun shines on in any one of the four-and-twenty hours! I'm a blue-blooded sport from the Occident, with a pocket full of rocks and a craw full of sand! And there you have it, colonel, from alphabet to rigmarole!"

"This is idle blustering, not business, sah," coldly.

"Just a little preliminary flourishing, as it were, colonel," laughed Jumping Jerry, lightly. "Merely a bit of sparring with the muffs, before getting down to sober work with the bare gaffs. When I've told you *who* I am, I'll leave you to learn through sad experience *what* I am."

"I have not the slightest curiosity on either point, sah. You may be a monstrous good man and very desirable acquaintance, but permit me to say that you have a most disagreeable manner of making that fact known, sah."

Jumping Jerry laughed lightly, in no wise disconcerted by this labored hit. All such shafts seemed to slip harmlessly from his armor as reeds from the scales of an alligator.

"A rapier makes neat work, colonel, but a common saber is a heap better for chopping

kindling wood. But, as you say, let's get down to business.

"I'm a sport from toenail to topknot, and it is as a sport that I've come to Solid City. I heard the camp was running over with sport; that the citizens would stake their dust on anything from the serenade of a mosquito to the war-song of an untamed cyclone; that they fell off in their feed and took to moulting out of season if they couldn't win or lose at least once in each hour of the twenty-four; and that is just the sort of burg I've been longing to give a holy picnic ever since I first felt the pin-feathers sprouting on my upper lip!"

"I'm a lightning sport on forty-two wheels, every one of them run by electricity! I'm a gambler from Playville! A jumper from Leapfrog! A runner from Racetown! A pugilist from Tripphammer, and a betting man from all creation! All games are the same to me, so long as betting is free and uncramped by a limit. It makes me sick at the stomach to retire to my virtuous couch at midnight without having won or lost a fortune since cockcrow, and if the odds are suitable, I'm open to match a turtle-dove against a hawk, a horn-toad against an alligator, or play a mouse to make a grizzly bear turn tail and run for his hole, lickety-brindle!"

"Or even a steam-callope against your fog-horn!" laughed one of the sports.

"Even such hopeless odds can't faze me a hair," and Jumping Jerry joined in the laugh against himself with as much good nature as though a fresh feather had been placed in his cap. "To boil it down, the only use I have for life is to enjoy myself while it lasts; for money, to win more or else lose what I've got; and for either fun or money, I'll buck anything, play anybody, from death to the devil!"

"All of which sounds monstrous nice, but you spoke of business, sah," coldly uttered the colonel.

Jumping Jerry stared at him in wide-eyed amazement.

"Why, bless your old bones, man, ain't I talking business just as fast as I can possibly wag my delicate clapper? Ain't it business when a sport shakes his weasel-skin over the table until the coins shed yellow dust from the friction, and uses up all his wind begging somebody to whisper their best hold? If that isn't pure business, boilded down, then here goes for a little sentiment."

"I'm a true chick of the Blue Hen, gentlemen all, and you, colonel, in particular. I was hatched by a prize hen, and my first cradle was a chicken coop turned on end. I chipped my way out of the shell with my spurs, and I was chief cock of my walk-long before I sprouted my first sickle-feather. I would leave grub anytime for a buckle with a would-be rival, and next to fighting myself, I loved to see others take a fly with natural spurs or steel-armed heels. Nor have I fairly got over the disease yet!"

"That's my biggest reason for paying Solid City this little call, gentlemen. From 'way over yonder, the other side of sundown, I heard a cock crow in this direction, and I dropped everything else to follow up the echo and discover its source. The nearer I came to headwaters, the louder and more often I heard of the game-birds of Solid City, until I actually felt that for one brief glimpse of those marvelous birds of Paradise, I'd abandon all my hopes of a reserved seat in the realms of bliss eternal!"

"I got there at last, gentlemen, as you see. I heard the heavenly music over the fence, and—but you know how I got bounced for my freshness. I came, I saw, and got left. But worse than all else, I got sadly disappointed, for the wonderful birds—excuse my emotion, gentlemen!"

Jumping Jerry paused to wipe away an imaginary tear, but the sports hastily hid their smiles as they saw how quickly the colonel flushed up, suspecting a slur upon his idolized birds. But Jumping Jerry blandly turned toward the colonel and in the silkiest of tones spoke to him:

"This breeder and owner of wonderful games, colonel; can you possibly stretch a point and introduce an ardent admirer of the king of all fowl—I mean of all feathered creation!—to the gentleman? As a personal and particular favor?"

"I am the only fancier in this camp, sah," was the stiff reply. "You have seen a fair sample of my stock, I believe."

The eager light faded from the face of the Gamecock from Sundown, and he seemed to half believe himself the subject of an attempt at mystification. But there was little sign of playfulness in either the face or voice of the ex-cavalryman.

"What! you don't mean those—not the chickens I saw with muffs on in yonder?" he ejaculated, with wide open eyes. "Surely, sir, you are joking!"

"I never jest, sah," haughtily retorted the colonel, his eyes glowing angrily. "As for those chickens, as you please to term them, better and purer stock never wore feathers."

"For the show pens, you mean, of course?"

"For pens or pit, either or both, sah!" thun-

dered the now thoroughly aroused fancier. "If you knew one thousandth part as much about game fowls as you would like us to take for granted, you would not need to ask any such questions."

"And I thought I had good eyes!" muttered Jumping Jerry, rubbing them vigorously, then staring owlishly at his extended palm, as though to test his doubted vision.

"Those chickens, sah, come from a strain that can be traced back without a cross for more than one hundred years, sah! During all that time, not a cock has been sold, not a clutch of eggs given away or exchanged for love or money! They originated in my family, have never left it, nor ever will—for when I die they shall, one and all, be buried in the grave with me, to keep them from falling into hands of just such hollow pretenders as you have proven yourself, sah!"

Just then a shaggy head was thrust into the door and:

"Say, kin you tell me whar I'll find Perdue Flickinger?"

CHAPTER III.

PERDUE FLICKINGER IN DEMAND.

"PERDUE FLICKINGER? No, miss, I can't—wu'ss luck for me that I hev to say so! I can't, indeed! I've tried an' tried ontel I've come monstrous nigh thinkin' the bull du—*dumb* head off o' my two shoulders, but I *can't* place the gent! An' yit—'pears like the name's tol'-able knowin' to me, too!"

Honest George Shanklin, host of the "Solid City Palace," the main hotel of that ilk, nervously mopped his red and steaming brow with a 'kerchief, shifting uneasily from one slippered foot to another, mentally wishing himself somewhere else long enough to recover at least a portion of his wonted composure.

He was painfully conscious that the white hairs shone conspicuously in contrast with his rosy cheeks through their night's growth; that there was a hole in his stiff shirt-front, balanced by a dripping of ambeer; that he looked years and ages older than the record would make him. Not that it mattered much, for he was a confirmed old bachelor, and anything but a marrying man, most devoutly though he worshiped—at a distance—the divine creatures. But, somehow, as he poetically expressed it to himself in confidence a little later, with those glorious eyes fastened upon him, filled with what seemed a pitifully appealing look, he "felt as hot as a boss a-sweatin'!"

And then with his dumpy little legs he vigorously tried to kick himself for not having presence of mind enough to think up a plausible lie for her especial benefit.

All this afterward; just then George could only shake his head helplessly and repeat:

"No, miss, it's no go. I can't place the name, though it somehow sounds like I'd ought to, fu'st off."

"But I have received almost positive proof that he is or has been here, at no very distant day," persisted that soft, musical voice. "Think again, please. Perdue Flickinger," and the lady slowly pronounced the name, as though that would help to refresh his memory. "It is not a common name. If you only *could*! So much depends on my finding the—the gentleman at the earliest possible moment!"

Miss Maud Vernon was in earnest, no doubt of that. Her fair cheeks turned just a thought paler, her large blue eyes glowed and filled with an anxious expression. There was no acting now, no trace of coquettishness; and the big heart of mine host swelled within him until he forgot himself, forgot all previous embarrassment, forgot all save a mighty longing to gratify the wishes of this magnificently lovely being.

For she was both lovely and magnificent, this Miss Maud Vernon, which name her own fair hand had placed on the hotel register the evening before. A blonde of the purest type, with a complexion of dazzling purity, of blended rose-leaves and new milk; with eyes large and lustrous, expressive far beyond the usual power of those most expressive of all organs; with hair as fine and soft as silk, the color of spun gold as the sunlight falls athwart it; with a face that—

"It ain't no use tryin'," Honest George Shanklin confidentially whispered to himself that night as he ruefully viewed his telltale white hairs and whiter stubble. "An angel fresh down from up yender, stewed in honey, an' sarved up hot with champagne sauce, with side trimmin's o' strawb'ries an' ice-cream, couldn't come within a mile o' her. One look at that face filled my ole heart like it was a balloon! An' a taste—Good Lawd! it'd melt an iceberg so quick that the water from the top 'd raise great blisters on the bottom afore it could turn to water!"

There were other passengers in the coach that brought Miss Maud Vernon to Solid City, but apparently she had naught in common with any of them. She transacted her own business, and this bright Sabbath forenoon she came sailing into the private office of her host, a perfect vision of beauty, a bewildering apparition, a crushing surprise. She looked so tall and stately, so much like his vague dreams of a queen, that George felt as though he wanted to climb a

ladder before he could even think of answering her, she seemed so immeasurably above him.

But Miss Maud Vernon was, after all, but a woman, and able to find a certain degree of satisfaction in the mute admiration of even this fat, pudgy little innkeeper. Her soft voice grew softer, her great blue eyes filled with that softly, silently appealing look which we "great strong men" find so hard to resist, even when we have the moral grit to make the righteous effort.

She made George deliciously miserable during the few minutes that succeeded her entrance. She made him feel that of all the wide world, he alone stood her friend and adviser at that moment; that without his moral support, she was lost; and all the time George was mentally cursing his slothfulness in not "cleaning up" earlier, and resolving to turn over a new leaf the instant the angel unfolded her wings and departed.

Yet, analyzed, the angel did not say much. She asked him first, how long he had been living in Solid City, and then if he could give her any definite information concerning an individual named Perdue Flickinger.

Poor George felt as though heaven was surely slipping away from his grasp when he was obliged to admit that he was unable to place the gentleman named.

"Think!" persisted Miss Maud Vernon, taking out a purse of silk from which came a musical, clinking sound. "Think again, please! I will give a hundred dollars for any definite information concerning Perdue Flickinger."

George Shanklin shook his head, flushing redder than ever as he replied, with a touch of real dignity:

"Gold couldn't fetch what a single word o' thanks from your pritty lips failed to bring, miss. To the best o' my knowledge an' b'lief, they ain't no sech man in Solid City as Perdue Flickinger."

"But I am almost certain he *was* here, and that within the past twelve months!" persisted the fair searcher.

"Mebbe so, miss, but not with that name; leastways, not to make much of a stay. Names don't count fer much in this wooden country, anyhow, but I've got a mighty good ear fer 'em, an' a monstrous bad forgettery. Ef any man with sech a uncommon handle to hisself as that hed lingered here, I'd 'a' made a note of it, dead sure, miss."

The fair face grew clouded, and the blue eyes sought the floor as one taper finger pressed the crimson lip against the pearly teeth.

"I must find him!" she muttered, more to herself than to her host. "This is my last chance. If it fails me—"

The alternative was not breathed aloud, and respectfully waiting until it was certain she did not intend to complete it, George Shanklin spoke instead:

"Ef they was any good reason, miss—ef they was any cause fer the gent to hide—in short, to kiver himself—"

"You mean, assume a disguise?"

"No 'fense, miss," hastily added George, flushing hotly as those vivid orbs flashed full upon him. "Folks do it sometimes jest fer fun—change th'ar names, I mean. It don't count fer nothin' out in this part o' the world, an' they all do it, more or less, so to speak, miss—deed they do, now!"

He paused at length, confused, uncomfortable, helpless, feeling that he had made a bad matter worse in his eager desire to give this lovely creature aid and comfort.

She was not looking at him, but at the top of her daintily-slipped foot as it mechanically tapped against the dusty floor. A frown wrinkled her snowy forehead, and tiny crow's feet marked the corners of her eyes, giving her almost an aged look as George stared mutely at her. She was thinking—thinking deeply and intently, and for the time being remembered naught of her usual tricks and wiles.

"Ef it wasn't too much trouble, miss," George suddenly added, brightening up as with a forlorn hope—"ef you wouldn't mind seein' him fer a bit, mebbe the jedge could be of some help to you in this matter. He's got the hull hist'ry o' all Solid City an' every critter as ever come within a hundred mile of it putt down—"

His tongue was again paralyzed as her great eyes flashed upon him, as her musical voice took on sharper accents than he had ever heard it before.

"What do you mean? Whom do you mean by the jedge?"

"Baldy Stopover—lawyer—call him jedge!" spluttered unhappy George, beginning to doubt whether it was, after all, worth the trouble to live and suffer thus.

"Where will I find him?"

"I'll fetch him in a minnit, miss, ef—"

"Has he an office? Will he be likely to be there, at this hour? Can you direct me so I can find it?"

George nodded assent to each query, though they were put so rapidly that for an instant it seemed as though he would snap his fat neck short off in the endeavor to keep pace.

"I will be ready in five minutes. Don't keep me waiting, unless you would behold my poor heart breaking before your cruel eyes!" lightly

cried Miss Maud Vernon, with a little laugh that was music and a smile that shamed the sunlight, as she turned away and ran up-stairs to her own room.

Almost before George could stop staring at the dingy point beyond which she had vanished, she reappeared with bonnet on her head, veil over her face, and a light, fleecy shawl carelessly wrapped around her shoulders. He started to make himself a little more presentable, but she would none of it in her ardent impatience. She caught him by the arm with a power of muscle that absolutely amazed him, hurrying him to the door and outside, bareheaded, in his shirt-sleeves and slipshod feet.

"A fig for ceremony, dear sir," she laughed, shortly, putting a stop to his panting objections. "The citizens know you, and won't care; they don't know me, and I don't care! The office you spoke of; where is it? That one?" as George pointed. "And the judge's name? Oh, I see there is a sign; that's all right, and now I'll not trouble you further—thanks!"

She dropped his arm and sailed away toward the dingy office without another word to the landlord. He stared at her with slowly rising indignation and disgust that soon found vent in a low muttering:

"Shook—threwed away like a lemon with its insides all squeeze out! Honey an' sugar an' golden-drip 'lasses ontel she found I couldn't sarve her turn any longer, an' then—good-by John! Durn a woman, anyhow!"

Miss Maud Vernon neither heard nor cared what George Shanklin muttered. This was a matter of business with her, and just now she had hopes dealing with Judge Theobald Stopover, rather than with the fat little host of the Palace.

That was the name on the square of painted tin hanging over the door of the dingy little office, and the same glance that took it in, also noted the dim outline of a human face through the still dingier window beside the door. The judge was at home, and not above taking a sly peep at the figure of a woman; nor at the face, for that matter. For with a swift motion Miss Maud Vernon swept aside the concealing veil and permitted her regal beauty to shine undimmed for a moment as she paused and seemed to be making out the name on the sign.

She knew that the judge was eagerly watching her, and she felt that in this case, as in many another, her face would prove a satisfactory passport. And she was right, for scarcely had her gloved hand timidly tapped on the door than the barrier was opened and swinging wide, revealed a bowing figure.

"Judge Stopover?" timidly murmured the fair creature, with a desperate effort stealing a shy glance at the red, round face within.

"At your service mum," was the prompt response, in a rich and oily tone. "Will you honor me by stepping inside?"

"If I might—I have business—" the timid creature murmured, with the same helplessly appealing look that had so desperately wounded the fat little landlord not long before.

"And I am a business machine, mum, nothing more terrible, I assure you," smiled and bowed Judge Stopover, adding in a truly fatherly tone: "really, my dear young lady, there is nothing to be afraid of. My clients, both male and female, seek me here when business matters perplex their pretty little heads. But, if you prefer it, I can visit you at your lodgings."

"How did you know I was a stranger in town?" murmured Maud, with widely opened eyes.

"A face like—that is, I mean, I know all Solid City by sight, mum," was the jerky reply.

For a moment the judge felt that "he had put his foot in it," for the young lady shrunk back a little as though taking alarm, but it was only for a moment. Then she timidly crossed the threshold, and he gently closed the door behind her, hastening to clear a chair for her accommodation.

There were cobwebs enough in the one contracted room to serve tolerably well for a spider's den, and to tell the truth, Theobald Stopover, in both looks and character, could have represented the spider, fat and gorged, cunning and ferocious as the occasion might call for, without a severe stretch of the imagination.

But Miss Maud Vernon did not appear very much alarmed by the result of the swift observations. It might almost be said that her smile was one of satisfaction, as though she was most agreeably surprised in the lawyer.

And Theobald Stopover, on his part, was not long in revising the first hasty opinion he had shaped regarding this fair and timid young creature. George Shanklin, deeply as his self-esteem had been wounded, would have stared aghast and vigorously disputed the decision the lawyer arrived at, as little short of blasphemous sacrilege.

"Up to snuff—good actress, even if never on the stage. Admirably made up, but—an old-timer, as I'm a sinner!"

And Theobald Stopover rarely made an error in summing up one of his fellow-beings when he believed his interests lay in making an accurate estimate. A man of the world, familiar with

the lowest as well as the upper grades of society, for in his day he had been both rich and respected, he would have staked his little all on the truth of his opinion just now.

If not precisely an adventuress, as he rather inclined to think, this woman was far from being the timid, innocent creature her voice and eyes would fain convince those with whom the rude world brought her in contact. Instead of being a timid, trusting, helpless darling, she was strong-nerved, ready-witted, cool and practiced woman of the world.

And, timid, furtive though her glances were in seeming, Miss Maud Vernon was little less prompt in summing up the lawyer. She set him down as a shrewd, crafty, unscrupulous man of business, who would prove a strong and willing tool in hands that knew how to guide him.

She was right, as far as her judgment went. In ordinary affairs of life, Theobald Stopover was honest enough as the world goes; he would pay his debts and keep his pledges, provided he had money enough for the one and the other did not call for too great a sacrifice of his comfort or convenience.

Only for his unappeasable thirst, he might have taken and maintained a position high on the rolls of law and justice, for he had natural talents and a fine education, besides a decided leaning in that direction. But strong liquor, as in the case of many a better man, proved the one serious stumbling block in the path to eminence. At last his constant trippings drove him from the higher circles, and with a remnant of pride, even in his degradation, he turned his face toward the setting sun, and finally brought up at Solid City. In a mining town drinking was no disgrace, and though Solid City had no legal government, no law courts, no trials save those of Judge Lynch on extraordinary occasions, he knew that he could live there in comfort, if not affluence. Suing and being sued was weary and costly work, where the case must be heard days of rough riding away. Settling conflicting claims with steel and lead also had their drawbacks, even if quickly disposed of. And after "Judge" Theobald Stopover had interfered to settle one complicated case, handling it with great adroitness, since both parties expressed themselves as perfectly satisfied, his future was assured. From that day to the one of which this record treats, the judge ran Solid City pretty much to his own liking though he was ever careful to make no open display of his power.

In business hours he was keen as a knife, strictly impartial, deciding all points in accordance with the law. Out of his office, he was hail-fellow-well-met with one and all, high and low, old and young, saint or sinner. He could match bottles with the hardest drinker in camp; could finger the pasteboards as expertly as any professional gambler; could talk mines and mining with the oldest prospector on the range; could hold up his end in a free fight, or face his adversary in strict accordance with the code, as coolly and gracefully as the most accomplished fire-eater in the wild West.

Of course Miss Maud Vernon could not divine all this, just from those few shy and fleeting glances through her long curving lashes, but she was shrewd enough to feel confident that she would gain no ground by practicing her pretty, timid little arts on this veteran. And the instant she reached this conclusion, she pushed her thick veil entirely aside, looking the judge squarely in the face, laughing easily as she read his peculiar smile aright.

"You are a man of sense, and I'm awfully glad of it!" she exclaimed, heartily, her voice full and round, very different from the one she had thus far employed in Solid City. "It is tiresome playing the poor, silly fool!"

"Why play the role, then?" laughed the judge.

"Because it hits great simple boobies of your sex, right where they live, to use the vernacular," she laughed. "Because, if a woman once gains the reputation of being strong-minded, all those who would overturn heaven and earth in the endeavor to assist a silly, timid creature, and the very ones who can serve a woman best, would be the very first to growl, like the surly brute in the horse-car, 'then stand up and enjoy your rights like a man!' Because it is fun to be-fool the great awkward simpletons, and—they rather like being fooled, you know," with a short, light laugh.

"And I am not worth the powder, you think," softly laughed the judge.

"Too worthy, comes nearer the mark," was the quick reply. "You are not one of those who goes through the world with his eyes closed. You know chaff from the clear grain. You read me very nearly aright at first glance, and with you I prefer being perfectly open and frank."

The judge bowed in silence. He took the flattery for what it was worth, and had his own opinion about the last sentence. Until that was proven, he preferred to withhold judgment.

"I am always ready to do business, mum. We have no Sabbaths in this wild and woolly country, and just at present my time is wholly unengaged. At your pleasure, of course, mum."

"It will not take long to dispose of my business. In one word, can you tell me anything about a man named Perdue Flickinger?" abruptly demanded Miss Maud Vernon.

The judge met her keen gaze equably, giving no sign of having ever heard the name before that moment. He was closely watching his fair client, and she knew this. She kept her face from betraying her intense interest in the matter, but there was a peculiar glow and glitter in her blue eyes that betrayed her. She saw this, and with a sudden pettishness, abruptly left her chair and walked to the dusty, dirty window, staring out through it.

Only at vacancy at first, but then she became conscious of watching the approach of two human figures from the direction of "The Pit." She saw that one was a woman, or girl, the other a man, crippled and seemingly under the influence of strong drink. That was all, until, when almost opposite the office, the girl turned her face in that direction.

It was a strikingly beautiful one, even as dimly seen through the dirty pane, and a low exclamation broke from the lips of the watcher. She started sharply as a warm breath, tainted with liquor, fanned her cheek, and turned her head to see the judge, who had silently joined her. For one instant her face flushed hotly, but then she hurriedly uttered:

"Who are they? Do you know her—that girl?"

"I know all of Solid City, my dear," was the dry reply. "I know them, yes. The old man with the peg-leg is called Cripple Josey, for obvious reasons. The other—a dainty little mountain pink, isn't she?"

With her fair forehead begriming itself against the dusty window-pane, Miss Maud Vernon was watching the oddly-mated couple as they slowly passed beyond her limited range of vision. Apparently she did not hear the question put her thus, for when she spoke again, it was to put a question on instead of answering one.

"You do know them, then? How long have they been living in these parts? Not recent arrivals?"

"On the contrary, my dear, they were here before I came to Solid City, and I call myself quite an old residenter."

"And the girl? Of course she is not his wife?"

CHAPTER IV.

JUDGE BALDY STOPOVER'S FAIR CLIENT.

"His wife? You don't mean the wife of Cripple Josey, surely? No, no, my dear, her lot in life must be hard enough, but it isn't quite so bad as all that comes to," laughed the judge, promptly giving way as his fair client turned from the window.

"She is some relation, though?"

"Daughter, I believe, or gran'-daughter; really, mum, come to think of it, I can't swear just what tie *does* connect them," frankly admitted the judge, as he waited until Miss Maud Vernon had resumed her seat at the little table, then took the chair opposite.

"Yet you swore you knew everybody in Solid City!" just a little tartly retorted the lady, her blue eyes snapping.

"Affirmed, mum," bowed the judge, with an oily smile. "I seldom swear, unless necessity compels me. All the same, I do know all Solid City. I know Cripple Josey Barcus, and I know Miss Ora Barcus, though I could not swear positively to his or her pedigree, since I have had business dealings with neither. I know that the old fellow calls her his daughter, that she calls him father, or papa; that the relationship has never been called into question, to my knowledge. Still, of my own sure knowledge, I could not swear she is not his grandmother."

Judge Baldy paused abruptly, though he had by no means exhausted the vein—one in which he believed himself happiest, by the way; light, airy, graceful; saying so much yet conveying so little—but because he saw that his fair visitor was following him languidly, if she was following him at all.

All interest had vanished from her face and attitude. She half drooped in her chair, though her great blue eyes still rested on his countenance with a faint show of attention. And as he ceased speaking, she gave a barely perceptible start, like one suddenly roused from a reverie.

"You said—yes—the girl, of course!" Miss Maud Vernon murmured, with a delicious little smile. "One would hardly expect to see such a charming face as that amid such peculiar surroundings. It took me all by surprise, and for a moment I actually forgot the important business that brought me here."

Judge Baldy bowed and smiled. This was more like what he had expected when Miss Maud Vernon first crossed his threshold, but it was not his cue to remind the lady of what she had virtually admitted soon after. That she had forgotten it so quickly, told him plainer than words how deep was her interest in Ora Barcus—or, was it in Cripple Josey?

"I believe you did ask me a question, mum, but I fancied you attached but little importance to it, since you didn't choose to wait long enough for me to answer it," he said, in his smoothest tones.

Miss Maud Vernon flushed a little, then laughed softly.

"You noticed that, then?"

Judge Baldy leaned back in his chair, smilingly waving his fat hand. It was the same as saying that little passed before his eyes without his making a mental note of it.

"It was silly in me," frankly admitted the lady, wholly resuming her open air and free manners. "I saw you penetrated my mask of pretended indifference, and it nettled me for the moment. And yet, why should it?"

"Ditto, says echo, mum!"

"It shall not, longer," and her voice grew harder, almost unpleasantly metallic. "I need help, and I believe you are just the helper I need."

"I shall be most happy, mum, in anything that doesn't seriously conflict with my previous engagements," began the lawyer, to abruptly cease as Miss Maud Vernon produced a well-filled purse from its hiding-place, opening it and singling out a crisp bank-note.

The slender, gloved fingers pushed the bill across the table, and that business-like voice uttered:

"Will that serve for a flyer, judge?"

Judge Baldy bowed lowly as the bill vanished beneath his capacious palm. Bank-notes marked with a "C" in one corner did not often come within legal reach of his itching fingers, of late years, and from that instant his hearty co-operation was fully insured.

"Your servant, mum! As a retainer, it is amply sufficient—it is munificent, I might say, without greatly exaggerating the simple facts," he mumbled, obsequiously.

"Is it sufficient to secure your best services, judge? Is it big enough to fully cover your lips after, as well as before you have done my work?" pointedly demanded Miss Vernon.

Her keen gaze was even plainer than her speech, and Judge Baldy came down to flat business.

"I'll swear it on the Book, if you'd rather."

"No need of that," with a short laugh. "All I wanted was to show you that I'm going into this matter with my eyes wide open. I'm willing to pay a good price for genuine service, but those who try to get too much for nothing are liable to slip up on it before the end comes. Of course you wouldn't think of trying any such disreputable game on an unprotected innocent like myself, but there are men who would."

"Never mind the smoothing-plane, mum," chuckled Judge Baldy, nodding affably. "My epidermis is thick, and proof against all such little slivers. Frankly, I'd serve you faithfully with only the inspiration of your beautiful face as an incentive, but I'm too old to throw away good money when it comes at me in solid chunks like this."

"And I prefer to pay in money, too," was the quick reply.

Judge Baldy bowed, still smiling blandly. He was keen enough to take a hint, and this was sufficiently plain not to be mistaken. It was the "hands off!" of one who meant every letter of the warning.

"It is the coin most current in these parts, even if not the most precious, mum," he chuckled, adding soberly; "And that is the last suspicion of compliment or flattery you shall hear from me, Miss Blank."

"Thanks! Love-making is all well enough in its proper place, but—" and the graceful shoulders shrugged significantly.

"You prefer selecting time, place and partner of course; say, Perdue Flickinger, for instance?"

"What do you know of him?" sharply cried the woman, her blue eyes glowing, her face flushing hotly, only to turn pale the next instant.

Judge Baldy laughed softly, and felt that he had fully repaid that barbed shaft of a few moments before. As he might have remarked himself, it was a frigid day when he failed to even up matters, by hook or by crook.

"Not a blessed thing, save that you asked me about him shortly after honoring my—by coming here, I mean."

Miss Maud Vernon read those twinkling eyes aright, and as her natural color returned, she laughed too, with an approving nod of her head.

"You like to keep the score even, I see! All right. But now come down to plain business and the simple truth. Can you tell me anything about a man named Perdue Flickinger?"

"I cannot. I never even heard the name before you mentioned it, a bit ago," was the prompt reply.

"But I have almost positive proof that he is, or was not many months ago, in Solid City!" she persisted.

"Not with that name for an everyday handle. I make it a matter of business to keep the run of every person who comes to Solid City, even though it is only for a couple of days. No man calling himself Perdue Flickinger is or has been here."

He spoke positively, then watched Miss Maud Vernon as she produced a worn envelope from her bosom. She retained the covering, tossing its contents across to the judge, who unfolded

the half-sheet of paper and took in the few lines at a glance.

There was neither date, address nor signature.

"If you wish to find Perdue Flickinger, you can do so at any time within the next six months, by visiting this place. Any sporting man can give you his address."

"Positive, but not very definite," dryly observed Judge Baldy, refolding and returning the paper. "Pity the obliging writer did not think to add the date and town, instead of trusting all to the postmark. You could make that out?"

"Without the least trouble. And the envelope was marked with the card of the Southern Hotel, same place, St. Louis."

"Quite a smart bit from Solid City!" grinned the judge.

"I went to St. Louis and made careful inquiries. I set a dozen detectives at work, and within a week they convinced me that the clew was a false one. I doubted them, but in the end I knew they were right. At the post-office I found proof that my letter had come from Chicago, under cover to the postmaster of St. Louis, with a request that he mail it there, which he very obligingly did."

"When you went to Chicago?"

Miss Maud Vernon nodded shortly.

"Of course. I had particular reasons for wanting to find Perdue Flickinger, dead or alive, and when I once enter on a serious matter, I'm going to stick to it until I can see both ends and the middle!"

"You should have worn—ahem!"

"Thank you. I believe I can win my way better as it is. I have never failed to gain the goal I set out to reach, and I've not given up all hope of getting there in this instance."

"I went to Chicago, and there I was not delayed nearly so long, thanks to the hint given me at St. Louis. I made inquiry first at the post-office. A tolerably pretty face, a meek and pitiful voice, a few sham tears, are very effective when rightfully played, and there was no lack of sympathy for me there. And as a result, I soon set out for Deadwood."

"The letter came from there, under cover?"

"To the postmaster at Chicago, yes. It was the old game; a note requesting the official to forward the inclosure to St. Louis."

"At Deadwood the task was harder, for naturally the workings of the U. S. Mail were not gotten down to so fine a point as in the larger cities. Still, the same arguments served me well, and after a few days of heavy thought—during which the amorous servant of Uncle Sam was just a little harder to bluff than you, dear sir!—I learned that my mysterious letter came under cover from Denver."

"A little warmer, but still decidedly chilly," smiled the judge, whose interest in the curious affair was decidedly increasing as Miss Maud Vernon proceeded.

"And still the right end was not reached," she laughed. "I could learn nothing at Denver, save that the letter, possibly, may have been noticed by a certain clerk who was then indulging himself in a little holiday up in the Park. I did not know how long he might be absent, and so, armed with his name, description and a photograph, I again took the trail. I ran the gentleman down, and after a little clumsy love-making on his side, I learned—that I must go on to Tombstone! It was the same old chestnut, by this time growing decidedly flat, stale, and in sore need of burial for decency sake!"

"From Tombstone to Last Chance I was sent, like a veritable gawk of April, and really it did seem that this *was* my last chance! It was remembered that the letter was a drop one; that it was addressed to the postmaster, and on being opened, contained a request to forward to Tombstone. Who dropped that letter into the box?"

The judge shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"A Hoax, would be my guess at the funny rascal's name, if you really wish my opinion."

"It was my fear, for a time, though I kept asking myself who could know of my interest in Perdue Flickinger? Who would take so much trouble to convey the information to me, through such a roundabout manner? It would be an awfully clumsy jest; there might be some excuse if it was earnest. And that spurred me on until I satisfied myself that Perdue Flickinger was not in Last Chance, had not been there when the letter was posted. No one recognized the name, or could recall a man of the appearance as I described him."

"A pity you hadn't a photograph of the gentleman!"

Miss Maud Vernon laughed shortly, but with a little gleam of triumph in her eyes.

"That same idea began to haunt me, and I wrote back home to see if something of the sort could not be procured and forwarded to me at Last Chance. One was discovered, and with no little difficulty procured. I received it, and though I could hardly recognize it myself, I chanced on a fellow who positively declared he did; that it was the picture of a man with whom he had a few words over a game of cards, in Last Chance, six months before that date. He

also declared that the original of that photograph came there from Solid City."

"A valuable clew, if reliable," and the judge dryly added: "Of course you had offered a reward for information?"

"You think it was false information, with a longing for ducats at the bottom?" laughed Miss Vernon.

"On the face of it, yes. If Perdue Flickinger wanted to thoroughly bamboozle you, and had the brains to lay out such a crooked trail, is it likely he would make himself known to a chance acquaintance over the card table?"

"The fellow said he learned all this after the man who played him for a flat had skipped town. He wanted to get even, and so took particular pains to trace out his pedigree. He learned from another the name and stamping ground, and while working for money enough to carry him here, he heard of my inquiries. He saw a chance to kill two birds with one stone, and for gold he gave me his news. I believe he was sincere. If ever a man thirsted for the blood of another, Moses Redheffer longed to drink that of Perdue Flickinger!"

"He never bore that name in Solid City, at all events," persisted Judge Baldy. "You still retain that photograph?"

Miss Vernon took a card sized photograph from the envelope which she still retained, and passed it over to him.

With knitted brows the judge studied the picture, watched keenly by the big blue eyes opposite.

It was a peculiar face, with high, broad forehead, shapely nose, and firm, resolute chin. But the eyes were afflicted with a fearful squint. The lips were twisted up at one corner, down at the other, resulting in a combination of the ludicrous and the horrible. Surely no woman could have fallen in love with such a grotesque figure-head! And forced to abandon this surmise, Judge Baldy glanced curiously toward his fair client.

She was laughing, silently but heartily.

"Look on the back, judge, for further information."

He obeyed, and a low whistle of surprised comprehension puckered up his lips.

"From the rogues' gallery!" he exclaimed, with interest.

Miss Maud Vernon nodded, showing her pearly teeth.

"Of Philadelphia, yes. It was the best they could obtain, for he would persist in distorting his features, as you see, and though, when all milder means failed, the officials tried to put him under the influence of chloroform, his wonderful will foiled them even then!"

"Some persons are not susceptible to the drug, I know."

"So they discovered in this instance. They saw that they could only obtain a picture of his natural face by surprise, but before they could do this, the bird had flown."

"He has served the state, then?"

"Not to the extent they wished."

Judge Baldy dropped the picture with a soft breath of resignation. His brows knitted a trifle, and his tones were hardly as smooth as before when he spoke again:

"You come to me for help, mum. I promise it to you, for a just consideration. I am willing to spend time and take trouble in your case, but you seem to take delight in keeping me in the dark as much as lies in your power!"

"You want my help, then?" laughed Miss Vernon.

"If I am to be of any service to you, I must know something of the past, in order to fit in the present and the future. This, if you really desire me to earn my fee. If you prefer keeping your past a secret, all right. I can put in time enough to pay for the money I have received, and then tell you the matter is too much for me."

"What is it you wish to know?"

"Who this Perdue Flickinger is. Where he came from. In what manner did he come into collision with the law. How he escaped, and from what penalty. What is your connection with him. If he is your friend, or if he is your enemy. Frank and honest answers on these few points will do to begin with."

Miss Maud Vernon hesitated for a brief space, her brows contracting, her lips coming together, her eyes growing smaller as they stared vacantly at the distorted counterfeit lying on the table.

It was the real face she wore now, a glimpse of which had that same morning so startled and amazed honest George Shanklin, of the Solid City Palace. With much more interest Judge Theobald Stopover watched the startling alteration, more than ever convinced that there was a history lying behind that face which would repay his perusal.

Without directly answering any of his questions, she said in a hard, strained tone of voice:

"Look at that picture again. Study it. See if you have ever met the original."

"I would not expect to, outside of a hospital or an asylum for hopeless lunatics," muttered the judge, but again picking up the card and holding it in the most favorable light.

For a brief space there was silence. Miss

Vernon watched him closely, eagerly, biting her red lip until it bled as she saw a light gradually spreading over that fat, red face; only to frown darkly as it faded away, settling into a puzzled expression.

"I seldom forget a face, and as a general thing can at once tell when, where and under what circumstances I met its owner. There would be no difficulty in doing as much now, if this face was not so diabolically distorted! It looks familiar—after a vague, shadowy fashion! I believe he and I have met in the flesh. But where? When? How? That gets me!"

He glanced quickly up in the face of his client.

"You couldn't possibly procure a more natural picture than this of Perdue Flickinger?"

"I don't believe there is another in existence. The cunning rascal wouldn't give even his wife one, though she begged him to sit for some when their honeymoon was young!"

"His wife! You knew her, then?"

"Intimately. In fact—I am Mrs. Perdue Flickinger!"

CHAPTER V.

MRS. FLICKINGER TALKS BUSINESS.

MRS. PERDUE FLICKINGER—no longer Miss Maud Vernon—laughed softly as she noted the utter amazement which filled the face of Judge Theobald Stopover as she made this announcement. Whatever else he may have imagined, never once had this fact crossed his mind.

"One of your questions has its answer, my dear judge," she uttered, with a wicked smile. "I am a grass widow—a widow bewitched, if you prefer that term—and I am searching for my runaway husband. I trust you may be able to help me bring him to Limerick—profanely speaking!"

The judge quickly recovered himself.

"It is for love that you are hunting him?" he ventured.

The smiling face grew hard and cold and business-like. She picked up the photograph and replaced it with the unsigned note in the envelope, which, however, she permitted to lie on the table before her. Without appearing to do so, the judge by a swift glance read the direction. It was to Mrs. Perdue Flickinger, Philadelphia.

That lady was taking out her purse again, opening it and extracting a roll of bills as she spoke:

"Before I answer any more of your questions, Judge Stopover, suppose we put matters on a purely business footing? You have received a retaining fee from me, but I prefer to see my way clear to the end before going in any deeper. I want to engage your exclusive services. What do you value your time at, per week?"

"For a long or a short term, mum?"

"For two weeks. If that is not sufficient to get at the root of this matter, we can make another bargain."

Judge Baldy Stopover hesitated, weighing the matter for a moment or two. He began to wish that his first impression of his fair client had been built on better foundations. It would be an easy matter to bleed such a woman; but this one! She fairly bristled all over with business!

"I'll leave that to your judgment, mum," he drawled.

"Will two-fifty per week satisfy you?"

That was almost double what the judge had first thought of demanding, and for once in his life he was startled into a hasty answer.

"It will buy me soul, body and breeches, mum!"

The red lips curled with amused contempt, and there was a trace of scorn in the rich voice as she made reply:

"For neither of which have I the slightest use, sir. It is your wits I am bargaining for, instead."

"They are yours for the specified two weeks, mum. And I only wish the engagement might be extended through life, at the same comfortable figures!" he laughed, softly.

"Don't let that temptation lead you into spreading your services out too thin, judge," with a light but significant laugh. "If I am only a woman, my wisdom teeth are well through, and if I am not thoroughly satisfied with your diligence at the end of the term, I'll make no bones about retaining the balance."

As she spoke, she pushed across the table a couple of bank-notes, making the amount paid him one week's salary, with the first amount given him.

"You are at liberty to do so, mum. I always work on honor, and if I can discover what you want in one week, I'll never ask you for the second week's salary."

"Show me Perdue Flickinger, or even put me on his track beyond the possibility of a doubt, and the whole five hundred are yours, though you find the clew before this sun sets!" she uttered, her voice stern and full of suppressed fire.

"I'll do my level best, be sure of that. Now, give me all the details. Tell me the past history of Perdue Flickinger. Omit nothing that can

possibly throw any light on his life after you lost sight of him."

"Whatever happens, you are to keep secret all I may tell you, unless I myself give you free permission to publish it to the world," impressively uttered Mrs. Flickinger.

"That goes without saying. A lawyer is, or should be, like a priest at the confessional. Anything confided to his ear is buried in the tomb," was the grave response.

His client was satisfied he meant just what he said, and without further preface she entered upon her story:

"I was born and brought up in Philadelphia. Beyond this and the fact that my parents were very wealthy, nothing more need be said on that point."

"I met Perdue Flickinger in the highest circles of society, and fell in love with him, as the saying goes. Don't judge him altogether by that hideous photograph," she added, with a faint smile. "That I can hardly recognize myself, even though the love-scales long since fell from my eyes."

"My parents were very religious, and something old-fashioned in their tastes, and though at that time Perdue Flickinger was something of a lion in select society, they never liked him, even as a distant acquaintance. He was wild, reckless, given to gambling and other still less holy dissipation, if the truth must be told. It was only whispered very carefully in our circles; he was rich, of good family, and so handsome!"

"Even with two such petted darlings the course of true love failed to run smoothly. Some one, who no doubt would have given her ears to have been in my place, took the trouble to post my parents as to how matters were running, and as I scorned to tell a lie when they questioned me, the explosion which followed was lurid and sulphury enough to satisfy Old Nick himself!"

"You can imagine the outcome, if you are at all experienced in the matter of feminine nature. My parents begged first until they grew angry with their obstinate child, then tried threats instead. They vowed to not only cut me off without a shilling of the money for which alone the handsome spendthrift sought me, leaving us their curse in place of the fortune he anticipated spending in riotous and unholy living, but they would even place me in a reformatory rather than suffer me to so utterly cast myself to the dogs!"

"Perhaps—I know it would have been better for me if they had kept this threat," she added, her tone softening and her eyes filling with more of genuine womanliness than they had revealed for many a long day. "I wish they had! I wish they had!"

Judge Baldy made no remark, though he closely watched the abrupt change, puckering his sensuous lips into the position for sounding a whistle of surprise as the proud head drooped until it touched the shapely arms as they lay upon the table. Her nerves were a little less perfect than he had estimated.

The weakness was but momentary, and Mrs. Flickinger lifted her head tossed it back proudly, her eyes glowing, a hard, unpleasant laugh parting her lips as she spoke again:

"Pardon me, judge, dear; for just a moment I forgot you were a man of plain business, and my promise to act naturally. Be sure you will not be annoyed in like manner by me."

"I was an only child, and had been dreadfully spoiled in the raising, of course. I had everything I wanted. No one was permitted to cross my inclination. What I said was law, if not gospel, to everybody but my parents, and even with them I early learned that I had but to persevere, to cry and plead and then storm for a change, in order to carry the day. Naturally, when they for the first time seriously crossed my will, I secretly laughed at them and their stern threats. I would not believe them in earnest. A little storming, a burst of anger, then tender reproaches and—reconciliation."

"Of course I told Perdue Flickinger all that transpired, and equally of course he encouraged me in my view of the situation. I believe he was sincere, too, at the time. If not, if he had believed my parents could possibly have carried their resentment so far, he would have dropped me like a hot potato. I say this through the knowledge I gained of the handsome scoundrel later in the day; then, I deemed him a demi-god!"

"Like a little man, Perdue bearded the lion in his den, and coolly asked him for his pretty cub in wedlock. He departed much more rapidly than he came, and with far less of airy grace. Not to put too fine a point on it, father threw him out of doors, and, so I have been told, even went so far as to use a very substantial boot in doing so! I did not glean this little fact from the lips of my noble lover, though!"

"A week later I changed my name for that of Mrs. Perdue Flickinger, and when everything had gone so far that it would be impossible for them to interfere in time, a polite invitation was sent my parents to attend the wedding of their only daughter! Perdue first suggested it. He said it would be no more than right. It would show that we thought of them even at the height of our bliss, and wished to be dutiful. If the message reached them too late for acceptance,

the carrier was the proper one to be blamed. Either way, it would be a piquant jest. And—so on and so on!

"Of course my parents did not attend. I didn't look for them, and for an entire week, I was too perfectly happy to even give them a passing thought. Then, I learned that they had both suddenly departed from the city, going none knew where.

"This startled me a little, but when I expressed my fears to Perdue, he quickly laughed me out of them. It was no more than what might have been expected. Of course they would be miffed for a time, but when they saw we could live and enjoy ourselves even beneath the shadow of their displeasure, they would come around and everything would be lovely. I was only too glad to be convinced, and casting aside all unpleasant fancies, I became more of a butterfly than ever."

She ceased speaking, moistening her lips with the tip of her tongue. Judge Baldy hastily rose and brought her a cup of water. It was warm and unpleasant to the taste, and she but touched her lips to it, turning away with a little shudder.

"It tastes as though it came from a charnel-house! Have you nothing else damp enough to moisten my lips?"

"Nothing fit to offer a lady," hesitated Stopover. "I can run out and—"

"That would take too much time," impatiently. "Give me what you have, so it be just a little short of poison. My lips are parched, and my throat is already on fire. Bah! I almost begin to feel that I really am cursed with nerves!"

It was a hard, forced laugh, and Judge Baldy watched his client closely as he produced a partially full flask of strong brandy. A disagreeable idea flashed athwart his busy brain just then. What if this liberal client should prove to be an insane woman?

Just then Mrs. Flickinger glanced into his face over the lifted flask, and laughed with her great blue eyes. His quick flushing betrayed him, and he was actually confused when she handed him the flask, saying:

"The money I pay you is sane enough, my dear judge, at all events! When my keeper calls for me you are at liberty to seek other employment."

"I don't—I didn't—"

"Your eyes did, if your tongue did not. And why? Because your vile brandy didn't choke and strangle me? Bah! women, like their masters, know what it is to seek for consolation and forgetfulness in strong waters, when their burdens grow too heavy for them; and I have had more than an ordinary share in my time! There!" with an imperious wave of her gloved hand as the judge attempted to mutter an apology, "let it rest."

"You can guess how matters went with us, after a time. We both valued money only for what pleasure it could bring us. We neither knew what prudence or saving meant, and our store of gold flowed like water until the last drop was gone. Then we lived on credit as long as we were permitted, for in all this time there came never a word from my parents. I did not even know whither they had gone."

"It was not for want of seeking. Perdue persuaded me it was a religious duty to attempt a reconciliation. All for my own precious sake, he made me believe. It was not difficult. I still loved him, still thought him but a wee bit below the angels of heaven, and all the better that he was!"

"He was the one to discover their retreat, and send me to them. They greeted me kindly enough. I was still their child. But they would hear nothing of Perdue. If I would leave him; if I would solemnly pledge myself to never see or communicate with him again, my old home was open for me. If not—if he was more to me than my parents—they could wait and hope yet a little longer. The scales would not be long in falling from my eyes, now that the rascal had run through his own little fortune. When he found they chose to hold their own, he would show his true nature."

"I left them in anger. Perdue was still the world and all to me, and as his wife I resented their base suspicions. Bah! why draw it out?" she muttered, her hands clinching, her great eyes filled with a reddish gleam, her brows contracting and that startling look of age and care coming back into her face. "You know what the end was, of course!"

"For the first time in our lives, he spoke harshly to me. Even in my surprise, I saw that he had been drinking too much for his hot brain. That, also, was a painful shock."

"He told me I was a fool for not jumping at the offer the old pinch-tights made me. It would please them, would pave the way to a more perfect reconciliation, and in the meantime we could see quite sufficient of each other, unbeknown to them. And I could hand him a few hundreds now and then."

"That was a bitter black night to me. Until then I was not what you could call a bad woman. I was foolish, flighty, a butterfly, but nothing worse. It was for the man whom I set above all the world to teach me meanness and

deceit. For, in awe at his rage, I consented to comply with his wishes."

"I did so. I went to my parents and told them I was willing to abandon my husband, for their sakes. I meekly took all the pledges they required of me, for I knew that their ideas of religion would not permit them to try to break the legal ties between him and me, by getting a divorce."

"It was only a temporary rest. Perdue applied to me more and more frequently for money, blaming me for not effecting a more perfect reconciliation with my parents. He drank and gambled more heavily than of old, for his former friends were falling away from him as whispers of the truth gained currency."

"I gave him all the money I could get, and then, when he came to me at midnight, pale and trembling, terribly excited, swearing that unless he could raise a large sum before day dawned, he would be worse than ruined; when he begged me to get the money for him, from the private desk of my father; I was too utterly crushed to refuse. I secured the money and gave it to him, and he had not time to get clear of my room before we were surprised by my father."

"Never mind what followed. Enough that my parents knew what a hypocritical part I had been playing; knew that I had stooped so low as to commit a theft for my husband; knew that they could trust me only as far as their own eyes reached."

"I know that father sought out Perdue Flickinger the next day, and warned him that he would be shot like a dog if he dared to venture within his grounds; that if he even attempted to communicate with me in any way, shape or form, a divorce would be applied for at once."

"That last threat was far more potent than the first. He had little personal fear, but he hated to run the risk of losing the big pile of money that would, sooner or later, in the course of nature descend to me. So father told me, but even then I would not see the simple truth. I would not give up my faith in the man I loved as women rarely love."

"Seeing this, father went soberly, sensibly to work to open my eyes to the real character of Perdue Flickinger. One by one he brought his secrets to light, backing them with proofs so certain that even I could not doubt their truth. He did not spare me one atom. It was kill or cure."

"Within six months I knew just what Perdue Flickinger was. I knew that even before our honeymoon had waned, he had proved unfaithful to me! That was enough. My love turned to loathing and most bitter hatred. In the heat of my passion, I wrote to Perdue Flickinger and told him all I had discovered. I cursed him as only a deeply wounded wife can curse, and vowed that I would never rest until I had secured a divorce."

"That same night came another climax. In a quarrel over a game of cards, Perdue Flickinger killed a man, seriously injuring several others before he could be overpowered and disarmed. He had a preliminary examination, at which it was shown he had been caught cheating, when a large sum of money depended on the result; that when he was accused, he drew a knife and with a desperate slash, almost severed the head of his accuser from his shoulders. He did this without any warning, without having been struck or even threatened. It was murder."

"He was remanded for trial, but he never stood before the bar. Somehow—no one appeared to know just how or by what means, beyond that simple fact—he escaped, leaving one dead man behind him. This, with what had gone before, was quite enough to set all the city agog when the word spread; but they did not know all that happened that night."

"It was along in the small hours that I was awakened, to find my husband beside me, knife in hand, looking like a handsome demon as he swore to slit my throat if I permitted a single whimper to escape it. He bound and gagged me. He robbed me of all my jewels. He robbed the private desk in my father's room, then came back to me."

"He swore by all that was good and bad to be my death if I ever dared to apply for a divorce from him, or to permit my parents to do so. He swore he would murder them, as well. And looking up into his face by the dim light he carried, I could see that he meant every word he uttered. Then I swooned away. When my senses returned, it was day, and my parents bent over me."

"They asked me what had happened, and in my terror and weakness, I told them all. They at once gave the alarm, but the escape was already known, and hundreds were searching for the fugitive. They never found him. How he escaped from the city so suddenly, or how he eluded the close and persistent search which followed, is still a mystery to all save the criminal himself. For me, I believed he was still hiding in the city, though I did not dare even hint at my suspicions, for I was horribly afraid of him, now."

"One reason—less than one month later, my father told me he had instituted proceedings to an-

nul our marriage. I begged him to drop the matter, reminding him of the threats made by Perdue Flickinger, but he was obstinate and refused."

"Within the week, our house caught fire and was burned to the ground. My parents both perished in the flames—or so the public all believed—while I was saved by, no one could tell me whom!"

"You think it was his work?"

"I am as sure of it as I am that you sit facing me now!" declared Mrs. Flickinger, with a strange calmness. "I believe Perdue Flickinger fired the house. I believe he first made sure that neither of my parents should escape. I believe he murdered them, then waited until I could not recognize him, and carried me to safety, to disappear the next moment."

"It is possible, but hardly probable."

"You think so? Listen: within two days afterward, while I still lay prostrated from the shock of the frightful affair, an unsigned note came to me, warning me to let my suit for divorce drop, if I would live to wear gray hairs! It was written in a disguised hand, but I could take my oath it came from none other than Perdue Flickinger! I thought so then, I think so now, all the more decidedly."

"You acted on that advice?"

Mrs. Flickinger bowed.

"I dared not disregard it, after what had happened. For the time being I was an utterly broken-down woman, afraid of my own shadow. I put a stop to the matter, and as soon as I could stand alone, I fled far from the city. Not so far but that that cunning devil could keep track of me, for time after time I found hints and signs which could only come from him."

"To keep from going mad I crossed the ocean, and plunged into the wildest dissipation. You see," with a short, hard laugh, "I am frank and open with you, as you wished. I committed many follies, and thus gave the crafty demon a still firmer hold upon me when, strengthened and hardened, I once more returned to my native city as you shall soon see."

"Years had passed, and Perdue Flickinger had never been retaken. Many believed him dead, but I knew better. They looked upon me as a rich young widow, but I knew I was still the wife of a murderer. And as so many months had gone by since I had heard from him, I believed I could procure a divorce without his knowing anything about it in time to frustrate my plans. I thought it worth while to run the risk. Why?"

She took a small sip from the brandy flask, then added:

"I was not so rich as most people deemed. I had passed many a night gambling while abroad, and almost always lost heavily. I knew that the wild, expensive life, which had become second nature to me, would speedily swallow up the remnant of the fortune my parents left me, and when an enormously rich suitor begged me to make him the happiest of men, I resolved to do it at the earliest possible moment."

"He was old and feeble, though coming of a long-lived race. He had known my parents long before my birth. He knew all about my luckless marriage with Perdue Flickinger, and he believed him long since dead. Still, to make all sure, he begged me to go through the empty form of getting a divorce."

"I was still considering, when another of those mysteriously delivered notes reached me, warning me to think well before violating my oath. It threatened me with a full exposure of my follies across the water. It gave minute details of scenes and events which I believed were profound secrets to all save myself. And this time the hand was undisguised. More than that, it was signed with a pet name which I often called Perdue Flickinger when our wedded life was bright and unclouded. After that, I could not doubt. He still lived, and was keeping frightfully close watch over me!"

"It does look that way! But why has he held back so long from claiming you, if that is what he intends?"

"Ask Perdue Flickinger, for I'll never tell you!" she laughed, recklessly.

"You obeyed him, of course?"

"What else was there for me to do? My millionaire is but little better than a fanatic on religion. He thinks a woman must be pure as snow and chaster than ice. Those little escapades of mine, harmless enough, after all, in any eyes save ones like his, would make him shun me as though I carried the plague in my very atmosphere. He idolizes me now. He can fairly smother me in gold, if I but say the word. I will say it—but I must find Perdue Flickinger first."

"And when found?" slowly asked the judge.

"Your duties will end at that point, and I'll take care of the rest."

"You must hate him terribly."

A short, peculiar laugh parted her crimson lips.

"Not so. Once I did, but that was before I knew what real life meant. Now—would you believe it?—I could almost find it in me to love him again as I did in those olden days! I rather admire him for his very rascality. And if I should find him rich—if he had half

the fortune of my whiteheaded millionaire—I believe I would go back to him, spendthrift though I know him. It would last us the rest of our life, I dare say, and after—what matter?"

She flung out one daintily gloved hand, shrugging her shoulders, a look on her fair face that made the judge, hard and cynical though he was, almost shiver. His admiration for Mrs. Flickinger had pretty well disappeared by this time, and he would as soon think of making love to a tigress or serpent.

Mrs. Flickinger smiled as she read his sentiments with tolerable accuracy. It was just as well that his growing interest should receive a check. Perhaps she meant that reckless speech to produce this precise effect. He would be less likely to interest himself in the affair, when Perdue Flickinger was found, let what might happen to him then.

"Of course I put off my eager if venerable lover, after receiving that warning. I begged for time, and he reluctantly granted it. Then, just when my poor brains were sorely perplexed, came that letter. I grasped at the hope as a drowning man grasps at a straw—to be strictly original!"

"You know what came of it. You know what reason I have for believing Perdue Flickinger here in or near Solid City."

"If the crime of murder twice over hangs above his head, he would be a fool to pass by his rightful name, even out here in these wilds," slowly uttered the judge. "Your man at Last Chance must have made a terrible wild mistake."

"Did I say he called him Perdue Flickinger? If so, I made an error. I mentioned that name first, and he recognized the photograph as that of the man who first cheated and then almost killed him at the gaming-table."

"What name did he know him by, then?"

"By none. He was apparently an entire stranger in Last Chance. It was only through a lucky chain of incidents that my informant discovered where he came from and returned to; this very town! If not here now, you must pick up his trail and run him down for me. I will rest content only when I meet Perdue Flickinger face to face, or stand beside his grave. There must be no mistake. When I go back to my home, I must be free to marry my gold mine, let cost what it may!"

"If Perdue Flickinger is anywhere near Solid City, I can and will find him for you," slowly uttered Judge Baldy. "It will probably take time, and patience, but I am hard to choke off when once I take up a matter."

"There is one point in his character on which, perhaps, I have not dwelt as particularly as it deserves, and that is his weakness for fair, young faces. He would risk the gallows any day for one gracious smile from the lips of beauty."

Judge Baldy rubbed his rough chin thoughtfully, but Mrs. Flickinger saw that he failed to fully catch her meaning. She flung out one hand with an impatient laugh, adding:

"You will not take a hint? Then—if Perdue Flickinger ever made much of a stay at Solid City—there is one person at least within your reach who can tell you all about him!"

"You mean?" gasped the judge, startled at last.

"Your mountain pink—Miss Ora Barcus, of course," promptly returned the woman, her lips curling, her eyes aglow.

CHAPTER VI.

JUMPING JERRY IN HIS GLORY.

ALL eyes were turned in that direction, and the speaker bobbed his shaggy head fitfully as he stepped upon the threshold with a hand on either door-casing, his eyes roving keenly from face to face as though expecting to alight upon the object of his search.

There was nothing mean or contracted about the dimensions of this new-comer. His dingy felt hat brushed the top casing. His shoulders so nearly filled up the opening, that his arms quite shut out the little remnant of light. His head was enormous, and made to appear even larger from the luxuriant crop of hair that suffered only his nose and his eyes to be distinguished at a casual glance. And hair of a brighter fire-red mortal eyes never looked upon.

About his waist was a broad leather belt, supporting two revolvers of the largest size and heaviest caliber, with a long, wooden-handled butcher-knife. His garb was coarse and travel-stained; a blue flannel shirt with sleeves tucked up above the elbow; brown, leather-bound overalls of heavy denim; coarse, heavy cowhide boots.

"Mebbe you didn't hear my gentle bazoo, gents, but I perlutely axed could anybody tell me whar to look fer a critter called Perdue Flickinger?" persisted the stranger, as none of those who were watching him so curiously, ventured a reply.

"What do you want with Perdue Flickinger?"

Jumping Jerry was the one who uttered those words, and his tones were hard, his eyes were glittering, his whole air that of one anxious to have his question answered truthfully.

The stranger grinned as his hands dropped to his waist.

"Es I see he ain't here, I don't reckon it makes much differ; but ef you run onto the gent afore I do, jes' whisper in his year that Red Mose o' Last Chance is in camp an' lookin' fer him like a mammy fer a lost kid!"

"You are Red Mose, of course?"

"Moses Redbeffer, writ' out full."

"Holy Saint Patrick! what a bull!" laughed Jumping Jerry. "Who'd take you for that sort o' cat?"

A surly growl came from Moses, and his eyes snapped after a dangerous fashion as his deep voice came again:

"I ain't longin' fer no durn foolishin', stranger. I axed you-all a civil question. Ef you ain't white enough to give a civil answer in 'turn, I reckon I kin go furdur an' fare better. They can't all be hogs!"

Before that blunt reproof was completed, the face of the Gamecock from Sundown was long and solemn as that of a deacon on catching a young couple hugging in church, and with a low bow he uttered apologetically:

"Your pardon, my dear fellow, but I really couldn't help it. The last batch of jokes I bought weren't bottled properly, and that one blew its cork out before I suspected the danger. I'll be more careful in the future, and— Oh! you asked about Perdue Flickinger? Exactly!"

"Tain't much news I'll git out o' the likes o' you, I don't reckon," growled Moses, with an air of disgust.

"And right there you're 'way off your base, Moses, for the little I can't tell you about Perdue Flickinger is hardly worth the trouble of listening to."

"I don't want to listen to nothin' 'cept whar I kin find the critter. Ef you can't or won't tell a man that, go soak yer putty-head, an' I'll go hunt up a white man!"

"If that's all you want—turn the first corner to your left, walk straight on and ask the first person you meet. If he can't tell you, keep on asking and you'll be happy yet!"

"I'll do it, but, mind ye—laddy-buck, ef this is a bit o' guff you're givin' me, I'll come back ag'in. Mind that, now!" growled Red Mose with a shake of the head that tossed his fiery halo until it resembled the sudden bursting of a red-light, then backing out of the doorway, permitting the screen to swing back into place.

Jumping Jerry apparently did not hear that threat, for he turned at once toward Colonel Fletcher, his voice smooth and soft as silk as he uttered:

"As I was about to remark, my dear sir, do you ever stoop so low as to shake a bag for fun and ducats combined?"

The ex-cavalryman stared at him haughtily, hardly understanding his meaning. Jumping Jerry laughed softly, adding:

"Some call it a turn-out, but it was shake-bag where I learned the rudiments. Call it by any name, and the fun climbs just as altitudinous, to my notion."

The colonel bowed shortly. He hardly knew how to take this audacious fellow with the fighting name, and feeling that he had been led blindly into one odious snare, he maintained a guard far more rigid than was his wont on ordinary occasions.

"That's more like it!" and Jumping Jerry nodded briskly. "I heard up at Last Chance that you sports of Solid City were quite too awfully tony, and I really feared you couldn't be brought down to the level of an ordinary man, even by laddling out brag and bluster by the bucketful!"

"It seems you thought it worthy trial, sah!" and the old soldier smiled grimly.

"Not so bad," laughed the Gamecock, in no wise disconcerted. "It was dreadfully embarrassing work for a truly modest man, but I did the best I knew how. I came here in search of sport, and a few blushes more or less are not to stand in my way."

"I hardly think they will, myself," dryly interposed the colonel. "But you spoke of a shake-bag fight, I believe?"

"Right you are, old cock! I'm on the make or break you. I left Last Chance with a vow to clean out the sports of Solid City, or else to leave my little boodle in their keeping. On the way I picked up a little fowl—I call it a game-cock, for lack of a more fitting name."

"Thank fortune I haven't lost any!" muttered Fletcher.

"So do I," laughed Jumping Jerry, "for then I might not feel quite so confident of making a neat little stake at the first fly. Not to even hint that your strain isn't good as the best, colonel," as that gentleman flushed hotly. "I only wish to insinuate that my bird is better than the best."

"Talk is cheap—cheaper than money, sah!"

"Now that is business, and here she goes, colonel! I've got a little bird that I think can give your best cock odds and a beating. Anyway I don't mind laying out a few ducats to back my opinion, if you'll give the little rooster a fly."

The colonel drew back a little, growing more and more stiff and unapproachable, his tones hard and formal:

"My strain is far too precious in my eyes, sah, to permit me to fight them without the stakes being worth while. Money is no particular object to me at present."

"That's where you and I are precisely alike, colonel," laughed Jumping Jerry, "for money is the object of all objects to me, and I don't care who knows it. Still, I'm ready to lay my pile on the heels of my little dunghill, and trust to luck for his doubling the score. Can mortal man say more?"

"I will match you for five hundred dollars, sah; not one penny less," coldly uttered the ex-cavalryman.

Jumping Jerry uttered a long, low whistle, staring at the dark, stern countenance with a ludicrous combination of wonder and disappointment. The colonel smiled grimly, with the air of one who felt his score was now even, and his tones were more cordial as he added:

"I'm sorry if you feel disappointed, sah, but, really, that is the very lowest sum I will permit any bird of mine to enter the pit in a match for. In fact, I am not eager to have them fight at all, in anything less dignified than a regular main. Sparring between themselves, for the pleasure and amusement of myself and friends, is all right; it is good exercise for the birds, and at least they are pitted with their equals—not with little birds that can be picked up by the wayside!"

The colonel could not entirely disguise a sneer of contempt as this quotation crossed his lips.

"I was thinking—"

"You have my answer, sah," was the firm interruption.

"I was thinking whether it would be worth while for me to walk over to the hotel and back, just to pick up those few ducats," mildly finished Jumping Jerry, adding in a brisker tone: "But what's the use of being a hog? It's sport I came to Solid City for, and the stakes will be enough to pay for one round of drinks, anyway! Done, colonel, if you can't give me anything better!"

It was Fletcher's turn to stare, now, and at least his astonishment was the genuine article. Like nearly every man present, he took this native Gascon for little better than a perambulating gas-bag, and purposely put his figures high enough to effectually bluff the fellow off, without the least opening for argument, as he firmly believed. Little marvel, then, that he was taken all aback. It was almost like a slap in the face!

"I said five hundred dollars, sah!"

"And I heard you warble distinctly enough, colonel. I'm only regretting the fact that you pitched your tune so low!"

"I'll double the amount, if you wish, sah," tartly.

"That's hearty, and double it is!" cried Jumping Jerry, "smiling all over his face" as he extended his hand. "Shake on that, colonel! If I can get any outside bet—"

"I'll cover every dollar you care to show, sah."

"That's double hearty, and now you've got to shake!"

Without giving the colonel any option, Jumping Jerry took his right hand prisoner with both of his, shaking it as vigorously as though it was a pump-handle and he on a rapidly filling vessel in mid-ocean.

"Down to little old business at last, and the Gamecock is flapping his wings in a bath of pure bliss! Cock-a-doodle-deo-co-o!"

The wild rascal leaped high into the air, flapping his arms and rattling his heels together in tune. And as he came down to the common level again, he spun a gold coin through the air to the counter, crying:

"Turn on your irrigation tap, Johnny, my lad, and all hands take an everlasting wet to the honor of the winning bird and the speedy recovery of the losing man's weasel! I'm with you, gentlemen, in spirit, until my material coporecity can cover the distance between this and the Palace twice over. Ta-ta!"

With a light, springy step, the Gamecock from Sundown left the bar-room and vanished from sight.

"Well, you're a pair of eagles ahead of the game, colonel, anyway," laughed one of the men as Jumping Jerry was lost to view. "The fellow is gritty enough, or he'd never pay such a long price just for a bit of bluff!"

"You think he was all wind?" asked another.

"If you ever see him again, or if he comes back with a bird of any sort, I'll eat my hat!"

But the colonel did not view the matter in that light. He began to see where he had made his mistake, and no man living was more willing than he to own himself in the wrong, when once fully convicted. He spoke up quickly:

"You are mistaken, Bennett. He will come back, and he will make his wager good, or I'm widely mistaken in the fellow. He does blow a little too much and too loud for strict good taste, but there's sand enough below the froth!"

"You don't think he'll come to ratify the match?"

"I'm so sure of it that I'm going now to pick out my bird," was the quiet response as the col-

onel turned away and left the bar, passing through to his precious pets.

His friends were impressed by his words but still they were doubters. One and all they had set Jumping Jerry down as "no good" when it came to the pinch, despite the fact of his having so neatly disposed of one of the nerviest sports in all Solid City. That was a bit of a trick, and altogether different from putting up a small fortune on a forlorn hope.

And they were still talking together in this strain when the colonel came back, having selected his champion for the coming duel.

"Tis all labor lost, colonel," laughed Bennett. "The crowing Gamecock from the other side of Sunset has not put in an appearance. Two to one he never does without some cunning excuse for the strange and unaccountable disappearance of his feathered treasure!"

"I'm just hungry for all bets of that sort, even without the odds, my hearty!" cried a clear voice, as Jumping Jerry entered the saloon, bearing a bundle under his arm. "The Gamecock is here, and so is his feathered brother. Touch one of them with an ungloved finger, and you'll be mighty apt to feel the temper of their spurs!"

Bennett flushed up hotly as he exclaimed:

"Ten dollars you don't come to time with your money for the match!"

"Give the eagle-bird to Johnny as soon as you can catch it, and he can put it to my credit and all of you can take it out in drinks," was the laughing reply.

"Win it, first!"

"I wish I could get into Paradise as easily or even win the shake-bag without any more trouble," grinned the Sport from Sunset, as he stepped up to the counter and gently deposited his burden on one end.

It was apparently a box, of moderate size, covered over with several folds of mosquito netting, dark green in color. The sports gazed curiously at it, but as Jumping Jerry kept one elbow on the top of it, none attempted any closer examination. Just then the stranger sport looked mighty business-like.

"I'm only an amateur at cockfighting, colonel, so to say, and if I don't go to work at the thing right end foremost, you must bear down a little easy on yours truly."

"You still wish to match a cock against one of my birds?"

"That's what I'm here for," was the prompt reply.

"The fight to take place right off the reel?"

"The sooner the better it'll suit me, colonel. I'm here on the make, bigger than a second-hand Jew, and the quicker I collar your ducats, the sooner I can take a fly at higher game where the stakes are big enough to keep a man from dropping to sleep right in the middle of the game."

The colonel opened a drawer behind the bar and dipping into the mass of gold coins it contained, deliberately counted out the amount named for his stake, then coldly gazed into the blue eyes of the Gamecock, as he spoke:

"Will you be so kind as to cover that, sah?"

"If rags and colored ink will do just as good, colonel, you bet I just will!" laughed Jumping Jerry, drawing a flat book from the inside of his shirt, opening it and taking therefrom a single bank-note and dropping it on the gold. "I prefer to travel light, you see, colonel, and precious as the yellow boys are, they weigh down and take up considerable space. Look at the paper close. I took it for good, but I may have been fooled. There's tricks in all trades but ours, you know!"

"When you are as old as I am, sah, you will have learned to be careful in these little matters," gravely replied the colonel, looking up from the bill. I mean no disrespect to you, sah, since it is my rule to examine all bills I take in."

"And you think you've taken that in?" laughed the merry sport, quickly catching him up. "Ain't you going to give me a ghost of a show for my white alley? Winning before taking is a mighty good rule, too, colonel!"

"It's just as good as won," muttered Bennett, as he tossed a gold coin on the counter. "There's your winnings, sir!"

Jumping Jerry picked up the coin, looked at it closely on both sides, bit it, smelled of it, rung it twice on the bar, then spun it over to the grinning barkeeper with:

"Melt it up for the thirsty, Johnny, please. It's against my rules to keep any but cheerful winnings in my pocket."

"What do you mean by that speech, sir?" flashed Bennett.

The Gamecock eyed him coolly, almost insolently.

"Almost anything you choose to infer, my friend. You went out of your way to crowd that bet on me. You paid it with a poorly-concealed growl. And now, while you are thinking over what I have said, let me say one thing more: You haven't got many more of the yellow-boys that says I won't win this fight."

"Gentlemen, there shall be no quarreling in this place," sharply warned the colonel. "Bet-ting is all right; do as much of that as you please, and I'll say nothing; but the man who

starts a row in my place over this fight, must settle the costs with me in person."

"Fight!" laughed Jumping Jerry, lightly. "Why, colonel, we are like two chicks from the same hatching. We may spar a bit, just for the fun of the thing, but fighting—go 'way!"

As he spoke he flung out one hand with a gesture of derision, the action partially knocking off the folds of netting and giving space enough for a cock's head to show through the opening, then to give a shrill crow. Jerry turned quick as thought and covered the bird over, but not so swiftly that the keen-eyed colonel and several others failed to note one fact. And the veteran fancier broke into an involuntary laugh, while those who had shared the discovery with him, brightened up wonderfully and began to finger their money, eager to bet.

The cock's head looked trim and business-like enough, but instead of the rich, red color of a bird in perfect health and fit to fight for so large an amount, its skin showed pale and livid, one of the surest signs of unhealthiness in a fowl.

"Laughing's mighty ketching, they say," suspiciously said Jumping Jerry, glancing swiftly from face to face as though trying to make out what so pleased them. "Mebbe I'll have a wee touch of the disease myself before supper-time. If it isn't too much, would some o' you just whisper that funny joke in my left ear?"

"Business first, my dear fellow," laughed the fancier. "Please select your stakeholder. I will be responsible for any one of these gentlemen, sah."

"Suppose you freeze onto the pile, then?" suggested Jumping Jerry. "If you win, you've got the money, and that'll save the wear and tear of changing hands. And if I win, I'm not afraid to trust you long enough for the ducats to swap hands again," laughed the Gamecock, carelessly.

The colonel bowed gravely. Though so bluntly expressed, he fully appreciated the compliment, and accepted it as such.

While he stowed away the money, Jerry amused himself by peering into the covered box, drawing quickly back as the cock pecked him on the nose so sharply as to draw blood.

"Isn't he a darling, though!" he laughed merrily. "Handsome as a picture, and gritty—he's grit boiled down double!"

CHAPTER VII.

HOW THE GAMECOCK "GOT THERE!"

THAT was a plausible excuse for letting off a little of their pent-up merriment, and right gladly the exultant sports availed themselves of the opening. Jumping Jerry apparently had no suspicions, and laughed with the majority.

"Oh, he's a dandy, right from the mint, gentlemen, and I've got but one fear that haunts me. If he should get worked up clear to singing pitch, it'll take monstrous good eyes to see the fu'st of the fight before the tailpiece shuts it out! That's his only fault. He will put in the last lick fu'st, and all the fun is over afore it begins. If I had just a pinch of chloroform to make him a bit sleepy until the other bird could have a little show to spread himself, now!"

"He'll sleep sound enough to-night without using drugs," maliciously laughed Bennett, who had been one of those who caught a brief glimpse of the telltale head. "He'll go down before the colonel's bird at the very first buckle!"

"And your word is gospel, of course," said Jumping Jerry, with a mock bow. "How much did you say your weasel-skin held? It starts a well-spring of joy to gushing up in each bootleg for to meet with just such innocent chickens as you! Would that the woods were fully of them, and each one carried a wad as big as a haystack! I'd soon retire from public life on my wealth, and devote my shining talents to cultivating a bay-window on my front story!"

"Money talks in this town, if that clapper of yours will give it half a chance," bluntly retorted Bennett, eager to make his hay while the sun shone, knowing how quick his fellows would be to snatch at what he and they now considered a most gloriously "soft snap!"

The Gamecock tossed his note-book across to the colonel, with a pleasant smile as he said:

"Will you oblige me by holding stakes for the whole outfit, so far as I am concerned, colonel? I have no small bills, but maybe Johnny yonder can make out the change. I wouldn't trouble you, sir, but I want to devote all of my talents to talking the rest of the sports up to betting pitch."

Fletcher hesitated, then pushed the note-book back, paying no attention to Bennett's money, now spread on the counter for easy reckoning. At first he had taken a strong dislike to this noisy sport from the Occident, so different from his own style. He set him down as an empty braggart who would, ten chances to one, wind up by begging a free drink or a dollar with which to pay his lodging bill. But this opinion had undergone a change, and though he could not yet bring himself to forget or forgive those shameful slurs against his idolized birds, he began to recognize the sterling metal that underlay the flashy plating.

"Of course, if you insist upon it, sah, I have nothing more to say," he gravely remarked, his

dark eyes filling with a light that was kindly, almost friendly. "Your money is your own to do with as you please, and you can fling it away by the handful, if that course suits you."

"Me?" ejaculated the Gamecock, with widely opened eyes, and a ludicrous affectation of holy horror at the bare idea. "Throw away money by the—well, when I do, I want you to catch me by the shortest route, sandpaper my cranium and bottle me up until my common senses come back to take care of my uncommon dollars! But I hain't lost any very hefty amount yet, that I'm aware of."

The colonel listened quietly to this outburst, bowing as though asking pardon for even daring to offer advice.

"You will, soon, sah. I made this wager of ours in perfect good faith, on your pressing me hard. I had neither seen nor heard of your bird at the time, or, frankly, I would have thought twice before putting my money up."

Jumping Jerry was closely watching the fancier, his blue eyes filled with a steady, shrewd light that was not easy to interpret. He could see that the colonel was in deep earnest, and this fact may have softened his answer:

"If any other gentleman uttered those words, colonel, I'd think he wanted to take water, the wu'st kind!"

Fletcher drew himself up haughtily, his voice growing harder as he responded:

"With me, sah, a bet once made in good faith, remains such until it is decided won and lost. If I was as certain of losing as I now am of winning the stakes, I would cut off my tongue befo' it should form one syllable that even a fool could twist into a desire to withdraw money regularly posted, sah!"

"I knew it, and that's just what gets me," frankly added Jumping Jerry. "I reckon I must be growing thick-witted, but ef you would jest light a match and hold it up right close to that warning, so the gleam shines through, mebbe I could make some sort o' guess at your meaning—durned ef I kin now!"

"I am an older hand at the business than you are, Gamecock though you call yourself, sah, and I am not ashamed to say I've made the birds the one particular study of my life. I caught a glimpse of your cock's head when he crowed, just now. On my honnah, sah, it was purely by accident. The crow attracted my attention involuntarily. But I saw enough to feel confident you have no earthly show of winning this fight, sah."

"My ducats say I will," was the laughing retort.

"Then they sing false'y, my dear sah," with a grim smile.

"Of course it wouldn't do to hint that your ear fer music has gone back on you, this trip, colonel?"

The ex-cavalryman flushed a little despite his resolve to do the fair thing by this cheeky stranger to Solid City. It would be so much easier to let him learn wisdom through sad experience. Possibly it might cure him of gasconading so recklessly. But he had a spice of the bull-dog in his composition, and when once taking hold, it was hard to let go.

"Your bird is stale, sah, and even if he came of the best and purest strain of fighters the world ever saw, sah, he would not be able to stand for five minutes before my cock! I don't say it in boasting, sah, but as a simple matter of fact," he added, coldly, with the air of a man who, having performed a duty he owed himself, was willing to wash his hands of the matter for good and all.

Jumping Jerry laughed shortly, his eyes glowing, his face that of one who feels a particular friend attacked without just cause.

"I don't set up for a prophet, myself, preferring to let my money do the business talking. And that money from the first dollar to the last cent, says my cock, stale or no stale, can whip the best bird you've got in your whole yard!"

Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher bowed coldly.

"I meant it fo' your own good, sah, but since you look at my friendly words in that light, be sure I'll never repeat them. Make your bets. What my friends leave uncovered of your pile, I'll match on my own account, sah."

"Now, that's the sort of lingo that fills my ears like music from a celestial brass band, and sends the shivers of pure delight clean down to my lowermost regions, as though every syllable was carved out of quicksilver," laughed Jumping Jerry, his blue eyes flashing over the faces of the eager sports, who one and all seemed in a hurry to secure at least one bite at the "pie," as they considered this curiously brought about match.

"Hit me lightly for the first round, gentlemen," chuckled the Gamecock from Sundown. "I'm not a perambulating gold mine just at present, but what I've got you're perfectly welcome to—if you can win it! I came from Last Chance to make or break, with a small capital in cash and an unlimited supply of confidence and cheek. There's three goose eggs with a figure four as file-leader left in the weasel-skin, and the sooner you divide it up between you, the quicker you'll get a fair squint at the glorious eagle-bird that's going to make you feel like kicking yourselves all over a sixty-acre lot! I'd treat your

peepers before only I know I couldn't get a red cent bet against the dandy darling when once you've taken in all his fighting points."

Jumping Jerry gave his tongue a brief rest, for he saw that no one was paying attention to what he uttered. Each man was making haste to get a share of the tempting four thousand dollars this rattle-brained sport seemed bent on throwing away.

The colonel booked each bet, and when all present had got what they wanted, or what they were ready to stake just then, he summed up the items and wrote his own name against the small remnant, passing the book across to Jumping Jerry for his inspection. But the careless sport airily waved it away, smiling frankly as he uttered:

"No need between gentlemen, sir. If you are satisfied I am. Some day I hope I may be able to reciprocate your kindness; until then, I must remain your debtor."

This was a new side to the character of the dashing sport, and as he turned to the box containing his bird, the veteran fancier began to wish his winnings were not quite so fully assured, or, if not quite that far, that he had held out stiffer against being forced into making the match. It was rank robbery to—

His reflections ceased abruptly right there, as Jumping Jerry took a beautiful gamecock out of the box. His experienced eye took in its admirable points at a single glance, and his jaws set a little more firmly as he bent forward to look more closely at the trim head.

Colonel Fletcher rarely swore, but he did then—a sonorous oath that came from the very bottom of his lungs!

"Tricks in all trades but ours, colonel," grinned Jumping Jerry, with a malicious chuckle as he tenderly wiped the head of his fowl with a corner of his flowing kerchief. "Not that I'd be guilty of such a thing, but that dandy bird just beats the whole world for curiosity. Never sees a sight but it must stick its nose into it! I reckon it took a turn round the kitchen, over to the Palace, and some of the flour and grease stuck to its head! There—that looks better!"

Indeed it did, to all save those whose money had chiefly been staked through the influence of that one brief glimpse at an unhealthy seeming head, for now the richly red color of the carefully rubbed head and ears showed no signs of staleness, or anything but vigorous life and perfect health and condition.

"It's a vile, low trick such as no Southern gentleman would be guilty of, sah!" exclaimed the colonel, his face redder than that of the gamecock, his eyes glowing angrily.

"But I'm only a poor Northern muddsill, you know," laughed Jerry, caressingly passing a hand over the glossy feathers of his pet. "I don't think any particular set of rules were mentioned before the match was made, colonel. Nor do I recall anything against a silly bird showing his feminine descent by taking to powder for his complexion; do you?"

"No law, save that of honor, sah," was the stiff reply.

"Which has precious little to do with cock-fighting, if the truth must be told," shrugged Jerry. "Still, if you want to draw out and so save your bird—"

"You have gone far enough, sah," sharply interposed the ex-cavalryman. "You are beneath my roof; don't make me forget that fact, for your own, if not for decency's sake, sah!"

He turned abruptly away, afraid to trust himself longer beneath that mocking gaze. He had never, even when poverty pressed hardest upon him, forgotten the strict and rigid sense of honor which had been impressed upon him from early childhood. He would rather starve than have even the suspicion of trickery touch his skirts; and though this was a common trick with nearly all who followed cock-fighting for the amount of money there was in it, and regarded by few as anything wrong, it disgusted him to the very core.

Jumping Jerry apparently cared little for the ill-feelings he had created. He stood by the bar, caressing his bird, answering back its defiant crows with a fidelity remarkable as coming from a human throat. And he had good reason for feeling proud of his gallant partner, for a more beautiful specimen of the gamecock in full feather could hardly be imagined.

It was of the breed known to the profession as Duckwing, and its charmingly-contrasted colors were brilliant, glossy, yet hard and stiff enough to satisfy the most exacting lover of the pit.

Its face was bright crimson; the head just covered with small, fine feathers of silvery whiteness; its hackle white with the least possible tinge of light gold; its back was almost wine-color—maroon, with a slight yellow cast; its saddle was nearly cream-color, the feathers remarkably fine and short, just sufficient to cover the points of the wings; the shoulders of reddish gold, down to a clear, steel-colored bar; the shoulder butts, tail and breast jetty black, save that one could detect a shade of bronze along the curving sickle feathers. Its eyes were bright red, its legs yellow, and, as near as one could judge in its full suit, the cock would weigh nearly or quite seven pounds.

"Of course you wish to trim your bird before pitting him, sah," uttered the colonel with forced politeness. "If you lack the proper tools, I can accommodate you."

Jumping Jerry gave a little sigh as he caressingly passed his hand over the beautiful plumage.

"It's a pity to spoil the looks of such a dandy Sunday-go-to-meeting get-up, but I reckon I'll have to. Better that than to catch your last sickness, old fellow!"

Glancing up he added:

"Many thanks, colonel, but I always go heeled. I can do the work back in the pit, I suppose? It will make a precious litter if I trim the dandy here, I'm afraid."

"If you prefer it, don't stand on ceremony, sah," responded the fancier, with a grim sarcasm which Jumping Jerry recognized with a faint smile.

He had stood little on ceremony, thus far, sure enough.

"I come from the wrong side of the line, you know, sir," he bowed, tucking his cock under an arm and preparing to follow the owner of the place back to the fighting pit.

Once here he lost little time in getting down to work, and from the ready, business-like manner in which he set about trimming his bird, the colonel knew he had to do with anything but an amateur.

First tying the legs of the cock with his folded kerchief, Jerry placed it upon his lap, holding its legs between his own knees, with the head of the bird toward him. He drew a long, slender pair of shears from his bosom, with his left hand encircling the cock's neck, closing thumb and finger until they touched the skin, drawing them slightly forward, thus reversing the whole of the neck feathers and bringing them about the head of the bird. This made them stand up like a frill, and the keen blades quickly cut the tips of them off all around, much as a barber clips hair, with thumb and finger for a guide. A few dexterous touches about the head itself, completed that part of the job.

Jerry next clipped a couple of inches off the end of each wing, then shortening the flight feathers a little more than the others. Another remorseless clipping deprived the curving tail of its main glory as an ornament, leaving only a trim, stiff, rudder-like appendage. Next, the saddle was thinned, and other superfluous feathers gotten rid of, leaving the cock like a ship under close-reefed sails, and hardly half its former size to the outward eye.

Jumping Jerry held the vigorously pecking bird up, viewing him critically from every possible point of view, at the same time muttering softly:

"You don't shine out quite so much like a gilt-edged comet, Dandy. You wouldn't look quite so precious too utterly put on the front gable of a blushing maiden's Sunday hat; but you'd make an old-time sport bet the shirt on his back when he saw you in fighting regimentals, as now—just you would, old pard!"

As soon as he saw Jumping Jerry had completed the trimming of his bird, Colonel Fletcher left the pit and speedily returned with a cock under his arm, covered over with a white cloth. This he intrusted to the care of one of the men present, approaching his rival and addressing him stiffly:

"Have you any objections to letting this fight be governed by the Southern or Virginia rules, sah?"

"Not in the least, colonel," was the prompt reply. "Any set of rules are good enough for me to win money by, so suit yourself."

"Then, of course, all foul gaffs are barred," and the dark face of the suspicious veteran cleared up wonderfully, for he reasoned that a man who would "doctor" a bird's head, would not be overly particular about dishonoring its heels as well.

"Those come anywhere near suiting you, think?" and Jumping Jerry held out a pair of beautifully smooth and polished steel spurs, which the other took and carefully examined.

"They are perfectly fair, sah, though a little longer than I use for my birds."

"If you have an extra pair, I'll exchange for them, though, if I remember rightly, there is nothing said in the rules about the length of gaffs to be used in a shake-bag match."

"Nor is there any restrictions, sah. If you are content, I am. Now as to the judges for—"

Jumping Jerry lifted his hand, and the colonel politely paused.

"I don't think there'll be any use for judges, colonel, but if you prefer, I can name only yourself."

"But, sah, I'm betting and handling against you, sah!" ejaculated the astonished fancier. "Why, I never heard of such a proposition, sah!"

Jumping Jerry laughed easily, a peculiar twinkle in his big blue eyes. Perhaps he was not acting so wildly at random as one might at the first thought imagine. A stranger among strangers, with a small fortune at stake, the time might come right speedily when he would need better backing than even his own cool nerves and good weapons. A good judge of hu-

man nature, he had "got the colonel down mighty fine," and knew that he could not more certainly interest him and make sure of his influential backing in case of trouble than by showing his willingness to trust all to his sense of honor.

"What matter, colonel? I'd have to pick a stranger anyhow, and I reckon you'd give me as fair a shake as the best."

But the veteran fancier would not have it that way. It was too glaring an innovation, and he insisted on Jumping Jerry selecting his judge, adding:

"I will answer for the integrity and squareness of any one of the gentlemen present, sah, with my own life, if needs be."

This was one word to Jerry and a dozen to the other sports, as they one and all knew. There would be no attempt at bulldozing the Gamecock from Sundown after that.

Apparently at random, Jumping Jerry selected Bennett.

"It's rather cheeky, maybe you'll think, partner, to make a man give a decision that sends his own good money flying up the flume, but somehow, next to the colonel, I feel better acquainted with you than with any other present. A little sparring with the tongue is next best to a regular knock-down introduction for making men acquainted, you see."

Bennett wanted to decline the honor, but was so taken by surprise that he hardly knew how to set about it, and before he could disentangle his wits, the matter was finally settled thus.

Then, all the preliminaries being arranged, the colonel took his covered bird from the care of the man who held it until now, and removing the cloth, revealed a truly magnificent cock of the popular Black-red breed, large and heavy, without a suspicion of clumsiness, a perfect model of what a fighting cock should be. And the instant the rival cocks caught sight of each other, they struggled to free themselves, crowing loudly and defiantly. Little fear of that fight coming to a sudden termination by one of the birds running away.

The owners and handlers took up their positions opposite each other, forgetting all else but the business before them. There was no delay, for all the betting had been attended to beforehand, and it only remained to decide the fate of the stakes.

Breathlessly the sports gathered around the pit proper, feeling an excitement and interest in the result which would hardly have been awakened had the duellists been men instead of fowls. For weeks and months they had enjoyed these peculiar little "matinees" of the veteran cock-fighter, but never before had they witnessed the birds face each other with the steel spurs wholly bare; nor had they ever had an opportunity to place so much money in the balance.

There was precious little sparring on either side and from the very first breasting, it was plain that the fight was to be of the hurricane order. The black-red was the acknowledged champion of the Pit, and the sight of an utterly strange intruder on his domain, sent him fairly wild with fury. The duckwing seemed no less eager for blood, and as the birds met together in the air at the first fly, feathers filled the air, showing how sure and deadly work they were doing. But both came to the ground on their feet, seemingly still sound, and then, before the agitated spectators could find time to fairly catch a long breath, they rose and met again.

Curses, loud and deep, broke from the lips of the sports of Solid C. ty. Colonel Fletcher turned white and cold as though changed to stone, for his pet champion came to the ground in a heap, quivering, shaking, beating the ground with its trimmed wings for a moment, then lying still and making no answer to the defiant crow that broke from the duckwing.

The fight was over. One of the steel gaffs, sharp almost as the point of a needle, had pierced its brain, killing it instantly.

Jumping Jerry flushed red as blood, but glanced in silence into the face of the veteran, then to that of his judge. Bennett hesitated, his face black and furious, glancing in turn toward Fletcher.

The colonel, stung to the very quick by this swift defeat of his champion, showed the sterling stuff there was in him. With a polite bow toward his rival, he spoke to Bennett:

"There is no need of your giving a decision so far as I am concerned, sah. My bird is dead. His still lives. Of course he wins all."

The duckwing did not seem willing to accept this decision, for it hopped up on the body of its rival, arched its neck proudly and broke into a crow so loud, so clear, so shrill, that it set the whole pen of game fowls beyond into a ferment of excitement. And the duckwing did its level best to answer each separate defiance with double interest, crowing as cock seldom crew before, almost splitting its throat. And Jumping Jerry, unable to carry out his modest resolve in the face of that temptation and example, leaped to his feet, casting his hat high into the air, pealing forth:

"I'm Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown, and Dandy is my prophet! Either one can hold the world level without spitting on

his hands, and yoked together, we can just naturally yank the universe—"

In his exultation, he nor any of the rest noticed a clumsy thumping, scrambling sound from the other side of the fence, nor at first noticed the shock of red hair that showed above the barrier, its owner holding on by arms and hands as he glared into the inclosure, crying:

"I say you critters in thar! Kin any o' you tell me whar I kin find Perdue—the devil! You, is it, you funny cuss? Didn't I tell ye I'd come back ag'in?" and supporting his weight on one arm, Red Mose drew a revolver, and thrusting it over the fence fired at the Gamecock.

With a sharp, inarticulate cry, Jumping Jerry started back, tripping and falling headlong to the ground.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. FLICKINGER STRIKES A LEAD.

JUDGE BALDY STOPOVER stared at his fair client with a puzzled expression coming into his red face.

"I don't think I follow you, mum."

"You might, with little difficulty, if you knew Perdue Flickinger as well as I know him," said the lady, with a short, hard laugh. "I told you he was a lady's man. What the vulgar might call a masher. Place him in the center of the 'rosebud garden of girls,' and before the dew was fairly off the blossoms, he would have a taste of their perfume from the first to the last. For lack of anything better, I verily believe he could and would make love to a toothless, wrinkled hag of four-score, rather than pass a single week without the food his vanity feeds upon. And ten to one he would so utterly bamboozle said hag with his melting looks and honeyed words that she would be ready to break her neck eloping with the handsome, graceless rascal!"

There was a curious trace of pride in the voice of the woman as she made this statement. She seemed to take pleasure in recalling the irresistible powers of her runaway husband. And noting this, Judge Baldy told himself the scapegrace need have little fears of this avenger if he but played his cards aright on discovery.

He was wise enough to keep the thought to himself, though, and contented himself with a simple bow and shrug of the shoulders that was open to almost any interpretation. He would wait until he saw the way clearer before him before fully committing himself.

"You think, then?"

"Say I know, and you come closer to the point, my friend," was the positive retort. "Granting that Perdue Flickinger has ever been at Solid City—and I am firmly convinced of that fact—he must have heard of this mountain pink of yours. Having heard of her, he would not rest content without seeing her. Seeing her—the rest follows as a matter of course. You have heard of her having lovers?"

The judge shook his head, gravely.

"No lovers, so to speak. Plenty of men who would have gladly taken that position, but the little girl would have none of them. Cripple Josey says she is far too young to think of any such foolishness. And more: he swears that the first fellow who tries to crowd her without his consent, will be fitted for a high lot in the bone-yard forthwith."

"And the girl? Ora, you called her, I believed?"

"Ora Barcus, yes. She meekly bows to the old man, and takes his will for her own, I believe."

Mrs. Flickinger laughed contemptuously.

"Doubtless the woods are full of just such meek girls, only, I never had the exquisite pleasure of running across any of them," with an incredulous toss of her fair head. "Bah! such talk sickens me! I have seen too much of the world to swallow such nonsense, and would not be afraid to wager my millionaire against a tramp that your sweet mountain pink is no better than the rest of her sex. She is not too young to have had dreams in plenty about love and lovers, and if Perdue Flickinger ever set eyes on her, he has taught her the one by becoming to her the other!"

"You may be right, but if so, the keenest eyes in Solid City have utterly failed to notice anything of the fact," a little coldly replied the judge, feeling more than ever certain that he would never fall in love with his fair client.

"Time will show," nodded Mrs. Flickinger. "Now, a few questions. Who are these people? How do they live? Where? Within easy walking distance from your office?"

"Less than a mile, north of town a little."

"Then, will you be so kind as to escort me there?" abruptly asked Mrs. Flickinger, rising from her seat and dropping the heavy veil over her face. "I have taken a sudden notion for a little ramble."

"You have only to command, mum," a little stiffly replied Judge Stopover, rising and preparing for the walk. "My time is yours, and I am ready to fall in with your lightest whim, mum."

"It is no whim," was the sharp reply. "That girl can tell all about Perdue Flickinger, if she

sees fit, and I'm going to make her open her little budget if woman's wit can accomplish it. Now you understand what is before us?"

Judge Baldy bowed. If he didn't, he would soon, he thought.

A few minutes' brisk walking carried them beyond the scattered town, and then Mrs. Flickinger moderated her pace, closely questioning the lawyer about the strangely mated couple seen through the dingy office window.

Judge Baldy spoke freely, as in duty bound, and his information may be compressed into a few sentences.

Joseph Barcus and his daughter Ora had been one of the first to settle at the Solid City strike living in a tent until after the probable limits of the town were marked out; then he built a small log cabin on a hillside some distance from the houses of his fellow miners, but near his claim, which he kept working after a lazy, desultory fashion. Apparently he had but little ambition, and a few dollars satisfied his wants. Enough to keep food in the house; give Ora an occasional dress; to buy whisky and make a few bets on cards at the "Pit."

This seemed to be the limit of his desires in this life, for Cripple Josey, in the estimation of the majority, was a little lacking in the upper story; if not exactly "foolish," he was decidedly "queer."

A very little liquor would upset him, and then the fun-loving sports at the Pit would enjoy themselves hugely. Josey was nothing loth to furnish the amusement, for then liquor cost him nothing but the swallowing, and his weak brain seemed flattered by the sensation he was creating with his clumsy antics.

But he had a guardian angel who kept a close watch over him, and the knowledge that Ora Barcus might enter the saloon at any moment in quest of the poor fellow, saved Crippled Josey from many a practical joke that might, otherwise, have been carried to extremes. Then, too, there was another element of uncertainty about the "sport" that led even the roughest to keep within bounds. Cripple Josey would shoot without hesitation when he felt in the humor, or fancied himself imposed upon too heavily. On two different occasions he had "lain out his man in mighty neat style," and never met with any punishment in return. Besides being deemed "simple," his provocation had been so great as to justify him in the eyes of those present at the time.

"He was drunk when we saw him, then?" questioned Mrs. Flickinger.

"A little under the weather, no doubt, though how he came so this early in the day I can't make out. I didn't see anything of him last night, though I was—that is—"

"When you were out with the boys," laughed Mrs. Flickinger. "You needn't be mealy-mouthed with me, my dear judge. Men are men, and the best of them have some little weaknesses. Lucky for us poor women!"

Judge Baldy maintained a prudent silence. He was growing just a little afraid of this fair client of his, and mentally resolved to keep as wholly on the safe side of the fence as lay in his power.

"Lucky for this mountain pink of yours, too, I dare say," Mrs. Flickinger added, with an ugly little laugh. "It would not be a very difficult task to deceive such a simple fool as you describe this Cripple Josey. More than ever I am certain she can tell me all I want to learn about Perdue Flickinger."

"You are wrong in your suspicions there, mum," doggedly uttered Judge Baldy, man enough to defend one whom he heartily liked and respected, even from one of her own sex. "No flashy scoundrel such as you describe has ever been fooling round her. If he had—well, I wouldn't fill his shoes for all the oro there is in Colorado!"

"Yet you don't look like a woman-hater," laughed the woman.

"I'm a life lover, though," was the grim retort.

"Is the little girl so dangerous, then?" with a sneer.

"Not that, though I do believe she could and would shoot, if pushed too hard. But she's looked on as a sort of angel of the camp, and all Solid City would turn out to avenge any wrong or injury done her."

"How intensely romantic!"

"It's gospel truth, mum. That's how Cripple Josey got off so easy when he used his guns. That's how he comes to get drunk so often without making much of a hole in his bank account. It is for her sake that the boys lets him off so easy when he gets on one of his fool jamborees, and if any one was idiot or brute enough to offer her insult or harm, two-score sixes would jump at him so quick, he wouldn't have time to ask for a ticket before he'd be clean over the range!"

"All of which has not the slightest interest to me, as I have no intention of injuring the charming angel of the camp," laughed Mrs. Flickinger, carelessly. "All I want of her is to learn what she can tell me about Perdue Flickinger. And that I will coax out of her before she can even suspect what I am driving at. Of course we will be sure to find them at home?"

Judge Baldy nodded. Cripple Josey was half drunk, and Ora always hastened home with him under such circumstances.

"Then you must look after the old man, leaving me a clear field with the girl. You can manage it, think?"

Judge Baldy grinned, knowingly, as he tapped his pocket. There was outlined the shape of a whisky flask, and his idea needed no further demonstration. It was just as well, for they were by this time close to the little cabin, embowered in climbing vines, situated on a little plateau a few rods above the level on which Solid City was built.

It was a pleasant, even romantic-looking spot, but Mrs. Flickinger had no eye for romance just then. Her keen glance detected a figure as it flitted across the room beyond the open door, and she knew that Ora Barcus at least was at home.

The winding trail had covered their approach until it was an impossibility for any one in the house to elude them unseen, even had they felt so inclined. Of course they could not suspect what purpose brought her there, but Mrs. Flickinger, resolved to leave nothing to chance which she could make a certainty, hastened her steps and paused pantingly before the doorway, looking very beautiful as a smile came to her red lips, as the soft, gracious light filled her eyes. She was once more the young, lovely, deliciously helpless maiden who had so completely taken captive the impressionable heart of Honest George Shanklin.

At a touch from her gloved hand, Judge Stopover passed her and entered the house first, stepping to one side to permit her entrance, his red face smiling, his oily voice smooth and affable:

"My dear Miss Ora, permit me to introduce to you, ah—"

"Miss Maud Vernon," timidly supplemented the lady, with a bow, shyly glancing into the dark, beautiful face of the young woman before her. "You will pardon me, I hope, for intruding, but I grew so tired and so thirsty, when the sight of your lovely home tempted me to—"

She paused abruptly, gazing fixedly, almost too boldly for one who was to successfully carry out the character she had assumed, at the face of Cripple Josey, whose start and sudden exclamation had attracted her notice.

He had been lying on a bed, seemingly dozing, when her entrance or her voice roused him up, with a start. And now he stared at her like one who is suddenly confronted by a ghost or some most unwelcome vision of the past. His face, what of it was left revealed by the luxuriant beard of dingy white, seemed unnaturally pale; his eyes shone like those of a terrified wild beast; his hands worked nervously at his waist, as though seeking the haft of some weapon.

Noting all this, Mrs. Flickinger, with a newborn suspicion that sent the blood from her face chilling back to her heart, gazed at him as keenly as the rather uncertain light would permit, trying to recognize his face, his features, his eyes; but all in vain. To the best of her belief, she had never met him before.

Ora Barcus glided rapidly across the floor to the bedside, taking the agitated hands between her own warm palms, whispering soothingly, but in tones distinctly audible to those eager ears:

"It is nothing, father—only a lady cut walking, who has stopped here for rest and a drink of cool water. You have been dreaming?"

"Yes, yes, dreaming—always dreaming, pet!" huskily muttered the old man; then rallying, he slipped from the bed to his footing, brushing one trembling hand over his eyes, then smiling faintly as he bobbed his white crowned head to the dazzling vision of grace and beauty.

"Servant, miss, says Cripple Josey! It ain't often the likes o' you drap down on us poor critters, but when you do come, you're mighty welcome, says Cripple Josey. Ory, gal, give the lady a cheer, an'—Waal, ef it ain't the judge, I'm a sinner from Wickedville!" he added, heartily, as he noticed the lawyer, hopping forward, his wooden peg thump-thumping sharply on the floor, his white head bobbing in tune, his hand outstretched to welcome his guest. "Tuck this fer a gospel shop, an' me fer a welder o' human critters, I shouldn't wonder, now, says Cripple Josey!" he added, with a low chuckle, as the judge flushed hotly, utterly taken aback by this facetious charge, as well he might be, since it was given in a stage whisper that could not possibly have escaped those sharp, shell-like ears hard by.

He frowned portentously, bringing a vacant, half-scared look into the face of Cripple Josey, who dubiously rubbed his bearded chin, as he muttered hoarsely:

"The good land, judge, did I say anything I didn't ort to? Ef I did, I'll take it all back, this very minnit, says Cripple Josey! I only thought, seein' you's so powerful crazy after wimmen, that—"

"Miss Vernon, and you, Miss Ora, will you please excuse me for a few moments, if I take Mr. Barcus outside? There is a little matter of business, which, ahem!" stammered Judge Baldy, for once finding his only tongue failing

him as he saw how awfully abashed poor Miss Vernor looked, just at that moment.

Cripple Josey spared them all further trouble, for he caught the judge by the arm and hopped to the door, muttering in that husky yet ludicrously disinct whisper of his:

"Hev you got any p'izen, jedge? I'm c'na'-most parched dry fer a snort, an' Ory she up an' hid my bottle. Ef you hev, I'll—"

His voice died away as the two men left the cabin.

Mrs. Flickinger sunk into the chair placed for her, her meek blue eyes resting on the flushed countenance of Ora Barcus, seemingly painfully embarrassed by that luckless whisper, but in reality summing the girl up with all the keenness and accuracy of a woman who had seen much of the world, in its darker as well as lighter aspects.

Yet with all her skill in reading character, Mrs. Flickinger was puzzled to definitely place Ora Barcus. Perhaps it was because she tried to look too deep, to discover too much, to find evil where no evil existed.

This Angel of Solid City was a surprise in more ways than one to the shrewd, suspicious woman of the world who watched her so closely.

She was no child, as that glimpse through the window of Judge Baldy's office had led Mrs. Flickinger to believe; she was a woman in both mind and person, if not in the number of years which had passed over her head. It was her small, childish figure which had led to that erroneous conclusion, but now, face to face, the elder woman could not but admit that superb as was her own shape, that of the mountain pink was equally perfect, though on a much smaller scale.

Ora Barcus was small, below the average height of her sex, but her figure was trim and admirably rounded, showing grace, suppleness and perfect health in every contour. Her complexion was pure and transparent, showing the rich hue of perfect health with every pulsation.

Her hair was jetty black, worn short, the capricious curls giving her at a casual glance a childish, if not boyish appearance. Her eyes were large and very bright, full of animation, constantly changing in expression, sparkling like black diamonds.

A sculptor might possibly have found fault with her features, but a true artist never; in marble the face might have been criticised and its weak points indicated for improvement, but seen in the flesh, with the black eyes sparkling, with the warm hue of health, the mobile features, the peculiar magnetism which hovers about all such favorites of nature, quickly disarmed and dispelled all thoughts of criticism.

Even Mrs. Flickinger began to doubt the correctness of her first impressions, which told her this innocent appearing child was in reality a shrewd, practical woman of the world who had nothing to learn from her of man's wickedness and duplicity. And doubting, she deftly altered her methods of approach, maintaining her soft, innocent, helpless role rather than revealing her real nature.

"Your father—so strange!" she murmured, with an affected little shiver. "It actually frightened me, he looked and acted so much as though he saw a ghost, or something perfectly awful! One would have thought he had seen me before, and feared I meant him harm—if such an idea wasn't so perfectly ridiculous applied to poor little me!"

"He is nervous when suddenly roused from a nap," coldly replied Ora, her bright face clouding and almost growing hard under the steady gaze of those great blue eyes. "He has suffered much in the past. He has never fully recovered from the awful accident that left him a cripple for life. You must excuse him, ma'am."

"The more readily that I was scarcely less startled," laughed Mrs. Flickinger, still keenly watching the face of her hostess. "For the moment it seemed as though I knew him, as though the face and voice of a long-lost and deeply-lamented friend had risen from the past to haunt me. Of course it was all imagination, but even yet the mere idea chills me to the very bone."

"Father would be very sorry if he knew how badly his actions frightened you, ma'am," quietly replied Ora, but with a barely perceptible curling of her ripe red lips. "Though you find him in such lowly circumstances at present, it was not always so. Time was when he could hold up his head with the proudest in all the land. But then came that awful catastrophe which—"

She flung out one little hand with an impatient motion, her face flushing, her eyes glowing vividly, like one angry with herself, and her tones were harder as she added:

"I beg your pardon for my forgetfulness, ma'am. You came for rest and a drink of water, not to listen to the doleful tale of wrecked fortunes and fallen greatness. I will not offend again."

Mrs. Flickinger laughed, more like her real self. She began to believe that her first impressions concerning this dainty little mountain pink were the truest, after all, and it smoothed her way nicely.

"For that, and for something more, my dear

child. I am looking for a gentleman named Perdue Flickinger; can you give me any information concerning him?"

Even before her question came to an end, Mrs. Flickinger felt a sensation of strong disappointment. There was no start, no flush, no embarrassment to be detected in that lovely face; only a faint, polite shade of interest such as an entire stranger might show through simple courtesy. Plainly Ora Barcus did not know the runaway rascal by his right name, at least.

"I never even heard of the gentleman before," quietly replied Ora, and that she spoke the simple truth both her tones and face bore ample evidence.

"Then Perdue Flickinger was never at Solid City, under his rightful name, at least," added the blonde, with a short, peculiar laugh that seemed to sting Ora sharply.

"I do not understand your meaning, ma'am," she said, coldly, but with flushing cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"Are you so innocent, little dove?" smiled the woman of the world, with a barely perceptible sneer in her tones. "Has your glass never whispered to you how bewitchingly beautiful you are? How perfectly irresistible that charming face and perfect figure would be to a lover of the beautiful in woman, met in this wild and out-of-the-way region, where the past would hardly be expected to rise up to nip his joy in the bud? Ah! you blush, little one!" with a low laugh.

"If so, it is with surprise at your daring to speak so strangely to me, madam," sharply retorted Ora.

"Why so strange?" and the great blue eyes opened widely. "I am searching for a man whom I have good reason to believe is or has lately been in Solid City. I know that he is an ardent admirer of the beautiful, particularly of fair women. I know he is like a butterfly in a garden of flowers, paying attention to one after another, slighting none from the queenly rose to the modest violet."

"A lover of yours, I presume, ma'am?" innocently uttered Ora, yet with a malicious sparkle in her dark eyes that showed how thoroughly she appreciated the opportunity of giving that womanly scratch.

Mrs. Flickinger laughed lightly, then coolly replied:

"Only my husband, little one."

"Your husband!" flashed Ora, rising indignantly. "Yet you dare to insinuate that I have been making love to him?"

"Just the contrary, my dear," was the cool retort. "Perdue Flickinger prefers to do the lovemaking himself, judging from the past. You say you know no gentleman of that name, and of course I believe you. I mean you no harm. I do not wish to insult you. To the contrary, I am seeking to guard you from evil in the guise of the handsomest, most unprincipled rascal the earth was ever cursed with since Satan invaded the Garden of Eden."

"I can guard myself, thank you," coldly retorted Ora Barcus.

"So others have thought before you, little one, only to discover their weakness when too late. You do not know what Perdue Flickinger is capable of. He is so handsome, so plausible, so irresistible! You would take oath butter would not melt in his mouth, if he saw a game worth playing the meek and innocent for, and then, before you realized your peril, he would have you fast bound in chains, which you could not, even if you would, break asunder."

"All this may be true, but it has not the slightest interest for me, madam. I do not know your husband. And, if I must say it, I have not the faintest desire to ever meet him or any other member of the family again," tartly uttered the mountain pink, her eyes glowing vividly.

The keen shaft glanced harmlessly from the armor worn by the woman of the world, if one were to judge alone from her soft, easy laugh. But there was a dangerous, almost vicious gleam in her blue eyes that told a far different tale.

"Very neat, my dear," with a mocking bow, as she drew an envelope from her bosom, opening it, and holding a card in her hand as she added: "That would just fascinate Perdue, the graceless rascal! Surely he could not have overlooked such a charming prize! And once seen, he could no more resist the temptation than he could fly without wings!"

"Once more I tell you I never met your husband, madam!"

"Under those colors, I grant you; but with such a dainty flower before his eyes, who could remember to speak of his legal chains? Most assuredly not Perdue Flickinger. Tell me," she added, holding the card photograph abruptly before the flashing black eyes, "did you ever see the original of this portrait, somewhat idealized and less distorted?"

Her eyes glittered maliciously as they saw Ora start and turn pale, saw her tremble and catch her breath sharply, at this test, though it was but for an instant. Then, taking and closely scrutinizing the picture, the young woman at length uttered:

"Yes, I have seen it, or something very like it, only to-day!"

"Where? tell me where?" excitedly cried Mrs. Flickinger.

"At the saloon called The Pit. I saw the face, I heard him call himself Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown!" slowly, deliberately responded Ora Barcus, her black eyes steadily meeting the blue orbs.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GAMECOCK PLANTS HIS PARD.

THERE were cries of angry surprise, an instant scattering among the circle of sports surrounding the cockpit at that treacherous shot, followed by the fall of Jumping Jerry. But no more bullets followed the first, and Red Mose called out in savage triumph:

"I tole the funny cuss I'd come back ef he sent me on a Aprilo fool tramp, an' I never go back onto my word to man or dog! Back I come, an' down goes his meat-house for all that's out, you bet!"

But scarcely were the last words clear of his lips when Moses Redheffer realized his error. Like a man on springs Jumping Jerry bounded to his feet, a vicious snarl of rage hissing through his grating teeth.

The giant rough uttered a curse of astonishment, and hurriedly essayed to recock his revolver, but before he could do more than make the first motion, the Gamecock was upon him.

With a shrill, piercing crow, Jumping Jerry rose into the air, flying in a doubled-up heap directly toward the giant, shooting out his feet as he came near the fence, striking the pine boards just below the flaming head, dashing them from their fastenings and hurling Red Mose with stunning force from his precarious hold to the hard ground beyond.

With a shock that would almost have annihilated nine men out of ten, Moses Redheffer fell flat on his back with the splintered boards covering him from head to foot. And before he could make a move to regain his feet, Jumping Jerry came down beside him, his feet spread wide so as to miss crushing his antagonist.

With a vicious kick he knocked the heavy revolver from the hairy right hand, then stooped and to e the leather belt from around Red Mose's waist, savagely hissing:

"Get up, you clumsy rascal! Do you need the spur before you dare face a man whom you tried to butcher without giving him time to say a prayer or ask the whys and wherefores? If you do—here goes!"

A single thrust of his foot turned the partly stunned rough over on his face, and then those trim shoes got in their work with a precision and regularity that Red Mose must have utterly despised, speaking figuratively. And not dainty touches, either, though so artistically applied where they could do the most good.

"Get up, you clumsy brute!" repeated Jumping Jerry, slackening a trifle in his pedal accompaniment. "Try to play you are a man, even if you are a craven cur!"

With a cursing groan Red Mose essayed to obey the repeated command, and did manage to reach his hands and knees, when the position thus assumed proved too great a temptation for Jumping Jerry.

With a shrill crow, Gamecock leaped into the air and shot out both feet, striking Red Mose on that portion of his huge anatomy brought most prominently into view by this position on all-fours, the force of the double kick driving him bodily forward a dozen feet, where he fell upon his face in the sand and dust, brokenly cursing.

And then Jumping Jerry seemed fairly carried away by his growing rage. There was naught of pretense in his actions as he leaped forward and stooped sufficiently long to roll the red-haired giant over on his back, then stepped upon his broad, heaving chest, lifting his right foot menacingly above the dust-covered face as he grated:

"Beg, you dastardly cur! Beg for your life, like an egg-sucking hound! Beg, or I'll stamp the life out of you as I would crush the head of a rattlesnake that struck at me from the grass!"

"Give the poor devil a chance!" cried Bennett, only too eager to even thus indirectly get even with the man who had not only humiliated him, but had left him "dead-broke" through the phenomenal skill of his feathered pard.

That was only the first of half a dozen similar remarks, for the ice being broken, the otherwise "broken" sports promptly caught at the chance to antagonize the dashing speculator from the Occident. And with his first hot glance in their direction, Jumping Jerry saw that hands were dropping toward weapons, ready to draw and use them on the faintest pretense.

He saw that Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher did not join his voice to those of the mortified sports, but if not raised against him, neither was his voice to be heard in his behalf. The veteran fancier stood a little apart from the rest, his arms folded, his head drooping, evidently in a bitter black fit of "the dumps" over the almost shameful defeat of his feathered champion.

It would have been a heavy enough blow to lose the choice one of his flock after a long and desperate battle, but to lose him so early, before the fight had hardly opened; to

have him laid out stiff and cold by what he had sneered at as a common dunghill rooster; that was doubled bitterness.

And, honest, true-hearted, generous gentleman though he was, he now stood apart with dogged resolution to let Jumping Jerry get out of danger as best he might; most assuredly he would not interfere to save him broken bones or even worse!

All this the Gamecock from Sundown saw at that single glance of his in answer to the growing mutterings of the angry sports. It sent his naturally hot blood to boiling pitch, and for a single instant his avenging heel hovered above the face of the helpless giant, already quivering with the fierce impetus that should crush his hairy face to a bloody pomace, that should drive the shattered skull in upon the brain that gave birth to that dastardly attempt at murder. But only for the single fleeting instant.

He gave no signs of having heard the threatening remarks of the disgruntled sports. He cast no further glances in their direction, but with a sharp, scornful laugh parting his red lips, he tapped the hairy face twice with his foot, then stepped from the heaving chest with the stinging words:

"Bah! you overgrown brute! Did you think even for a moment that I would soil my shoes with the blood of such a cowardly, treacherous, behind-the-back slugger as you? That I would disgrace my record by setting your name alongside those of white men and gentlemen?"

"When I do git up, you'll go down, an' stay down, durn ye!" gasped the red-haired giant, rolling over with an effort and scrambling to his feet with clumsy, poorly directed energy.

Rarely was a poor devil more completely bewildered than he had been and still was. How he had been overthrown so suddenly still perplexed him. All he knew was that a human catapult came flying through the air toward him—then came confusion, kicks, taunts, pains and—was it a chance to get even?

Still unconscious of the fact that Jumping Jerry had disarmed him, Moses Redheffer fumbled at his waist with one hand, while with the other he brushed away the particles of dust and sand that blurred his vision, broken, incoherent threats and curses dropping from his bleeding lips. Then a great blur came over his vision, and with a gurgling cry as of a man choking, he staggered and dropped to the ground in a heap.

"He's dead—murdered!" hoarsely cried Bennett, with a vicious glare toward the Gamecock from Sundown.

"You lie—under a mistake, my dear sir," and Jumping Jerry bowed with an insolent smile toward the nettled gambler. "Even if dead, the cur could not plead anything worse than a justifiable punishment at the hands—or feet—of one whom he tried in vain to assassinate; but fortune is not so kind. The hound is alive, and only lacks a drop or two of whisky to limber him up and put his bellows in repair."

"No thanks to you!" muttered Bennett.

"Not even the truth can choke you!" ejaculated the Gamecock, with an exaggerated expression of awe; but adding with sudden savagery: "Since you have fallen in love with that hound, take him away and care for him out of my sight. Take him away, I say, or I'll kill him as I would a rattlesnake, though all Solid City stood between us!"

There was naught of mockery now, nothing of pretense in the voice, face or manner of the Sport from the Occident. He was thoroughly maddened, his passions mounting to fever heat. He lost sight of all personal danger, only remembering that dastard shot and the harm it had wrought.

For one brief space, as he stood with each hand clutching a revolver, it seemed as though he had lost all control of himself, and was pausing only long enough to select his first victims before breaking loose in what could scarcely be less furious and deadly than the drug-inspired course of a Malay running a-muck!

Colonel Fletcher saw this, and his natural generosity forgot all else as he hurried forward and faced the maddened sport, his face full of earnest gravity, his tones those of friendly remonstrance.

"I beg of you, as a friend, Mr. Titus, to control your passion. I know it is hard—I know how natural it is that you should feel revengeful against the dirty whelp who so basely attempted your life; but after all, it might have been worse."

Jumping Jerry stared into that grave, kindly face for a moment, with an intensity that almost abashed the veteran soldier, then gave vent to a short, metallic laugh as he grasped him by the shoulder, turning in his company and striding back to the broken fence.

"Might have been worse, you think?" he uttered, his tones harsh and grating as he pointed with a quivering finger toward the center of the cockpit. "Is it not bad enough?"

Probably not another man in all Solid City could have come so near understanding and entering fully into the feelings which just then animated the Gamecock from Sundown as Fletcher.

"I meant—the bullet might have taken you,

instead," he muttered, for the first time feeling something like close kindred for this wild and reckless man from the Occident.

"Instead—it only murdered the best, the truest, the last and only friend left to me on the whole face of the earth!" hoarsely uttered Jumping Jerry, gulping down a quivering lump in his throat. "To you I don't mind saying it, though those fellows over yonder, nursing that red-haired brute, would laugh behind my back if I let out anything of the sort before them. Only a chicken! Only a few painted feathers and a lump of flesh that would taste good between the teeth of a hungry glutton! Only a gamecock! Only this, to them and such as they! To me—wife, children, home, everything! You know, colonel!"

The colonel did know, and almost involuntarily he uncovered his head as Jumping Jerry passed through the opening and picked up his dead gamecock: slain by the bullet intended for its master's brain.

It still lay on the stiffening body of its defeated rival, having dropped dead without a flutter or a sound, and unnoticed by all save Jumping Jerry in the exciting moment. Now, the bereaved sport picked up Dandy with a touch as tender and loving as a father could have shown toward a loved child. He smoothed down its ruffled feathers, covering over the bloody hole through which the erring lead had found its life. And then, shielded from the sight of even the colonel, Jumping Jerry bowed his head and silently touched his lips to the dead bird.

A fool! Be it so. I only record a simple fact.

Then, placing the dead bird in one corner, covering it over with his kerchief, Jumping Jerry turned once more toward the colonel, his eyes once more dancing with reckless gaiety, his face that of the dashing, careless, devil-may-care sport of earlier hours.

"So much for silly sentiment, and now for a whiff of solid business with our gentle cherubim with the angelic hair and the contradictory name from the stock-yard, colonel."

Fletcher touched his arm, an almost fatherly light in his dark eyes, his voice persuasive as best he knew to make it:

"I wouldn't, dear boy. It can't bring back Dandy. It will only be lowering yourself to his own level. Let him go. Surely you have punished him in a worse mannah than if you had shot him."

"I don't mean to honor him that far, unless the hog grunts so that nothing less will fill his maw. But talk I must—or bust!"

The colonel could not detain him longer without descending to actual compulsion, and with hard-set features he followed the Gamecock from the inclosure to the ground where the sports, with Bennett at their head, were restoring the red-haired giant to his normal condition.

A warning murmur from one of the party caused Bennett to glance up, and there was something in the coldly smiling face of Jumping Jerry that made him fall back a pace or two, his right hand mechanically gliding toward his waist; only to pause irresolutely as Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher cried in clear, stern tones: "Keep cool, gentlemen, and don't run the risk of getting your fingers burnt! As long as it is only man to man, my friend can hoe his own row, but let another dare interfere—I think you understand my meaning, gentlemen."

His manner and tone made it far clearer than set forth by his words. All Solid City knew Colonel Fletcher. He was slow to stir up, but when once thoroughly aroused, not the boldest fire-eater in camp cared to face him with tools in hand.

Nor was Jumping Jerry one of the most promising subjects for dissection, just then, blandly as he smiled, soft and gentle as were his looks while the ex-cavalryman was talking. If ever a "bad" man stood within Solid City, he was now before their eyes.

Moses Redheffer, now pretty well his usual self, thanks to a plentiful supply of whisky, just dashed with water—the latter for outward application by the way—was almost the only one who did not flinch from that double battery. A vicious light came into his bloodshot eyes. His red hair seemed to stiffen and stick out more obstinately than ever. His huge fists clinched tightly in lieu of more effective weapons, and instead of shrinking back as Jumping Jerry slowly approached, he gathered himself together as though about to leap upon the slender sport and crush him to death by main weight and strength.

The Gamecock from Sundown did not appear greatly frightened by these warlike preparations, though he paused again when just without the certain grasp of the giant, one slender finger raised in warning, his voice, clear and ringing, cold as ice, uttering the words:

"Moses Red Heifer, Blue Bull, Breechy Calf, or whatever you prefer to call yourself, this is a monstrous unhealthy region for animals of your breed, and if you're wise you'll tuck your tail between your hind legs and stampede for fresher pastures before I round you up for market. You have ears and can understand white talk?"

"What you got to do about it, durn ye?" growled the red-haired giant; then, brushing one hand across his uncertain sight, leaning forward with a grating oath, he added: "Double durn ye fer a cunnin'-faced cheat, Perdue Flickinger! I know ye now, cuss ye! I'll cut your black heart out an'—"

A low, mocking laugh from the lips of the Gamecock from Sundown cut his mad speech short.

"It's my age, you overgrown hog with the name of a better breed, and this is the way I shape my bets: I give you just four-and-twenty hours law. If you care for your hide, you'll put in your tallest licks during that period, and leave Solid City behind you at stampede speed. At the end of that period I'll take your trail, and run you down if I can beg, borrow or steal wind and bottom enough to catch you."

"You won't hev to hunt so durn fur, mebbe!" growled the giant.

"So much the worse for you, then, for after that period of grace, when and wherever I find you, I'll set shoe leather to work and kick you from town to camp, from mountain to valley, until you cut your own throat to stop the knocking at your kitchen door!"

"Talk comes mighty easy when you're heeled an' I ain't, ye thief o' cards!" growled the rough, showing his teeth with more grit than prudence under such adverse circumstances. "Ef ary gent here 'll lend me the loan o' his tools fer a bit, you cain't begin your music any too soon fer the old man!"

"I am quite positive no gentleman present has any tools to lend," sharply uttered Colonel Fletcher, with a meaning that could not be readily mistaken by any one within the reach of his voice.

"Waal, I ain't beggin' any o' you, crab-apple-face," snapped Moses, turning again toward the Gamecock. "I'll git even with you yit, sure!"

All assumed carelessness vanished like magic from face and manner of the sport from the Occident. His blue eyes glittered viciously as he retorted:

"There's no time like the present, since you are such a stubborn ass, Moses! I'll fight you with whatever tools you care to nominate, and either lend you mine or borrow others for you. Is that enough?"

"Ef it ain't all wind, heap 'nough!" eagerly cried the big fellow, his huge fists closing significantly. "Ef you don't back down an' take water in a hurry, I'll make that purty mug o' yourn a pictur' its own mammy wouldn't keer to own raisin'!"

"All by your lonesome self?" sneered Jumping Jerry, as he cast his pistols at the feet of the frowning colonel.

"You'll will find me a bigger gang then you kin run away from, boy!" Moses grinned, seeming almost good humored in his anticipation of getting even so soon. "Your durned heels cain't save you now! I'm a battering-ram from Triphammer!"

"A chopping-block from Clumsyville, rather," laughed the gamecock as he leaped swiftly forward and shot out his small, hard fists with all the precision and nearly the force of pistol bullets, their knuckles cutting deep into the liquor-bloated flesh, causing the blood to flow in streams.

And battering-ram as he so vauntingly proclaimed himself, Moses Redheffer only smote the empty air with his ponderous fists as his agile antagonist leaped lightly back out of reach, crying:

"Last warning, gentle heifer! I'll thrash you blind now, and if you levant without delay, I'll still grant you the four-and-twenty hours law. If you stay—I'll bombard your luckless rear until in self-defense you'll swear to meet me in a square fight at my own weapons. All said—and here goes for your ugly mug!"

Though those looking on watched what followed with breathless interest, it could hardly be called a fight, so unequal was the skill of the antagonists. Active, sure-footed, swift of motion as a panther, Jumping Jerry literally made of Redheffer the chopping-block he had dubbed him at the outset.

He rained a perfect storm of blows on the face of the giant, without receiving a single blow in return. What little science the big man might have possessed at the start, was speedily forgotten as those small but terrible fists played a vicious tattoo on his figurehead. And then, when the other was but little better than a blinded, helpless mass of cuts and bruises, the Gamecock planted his fists one after the other on his throat, sending him headlong to the ground, where he lay without motion, seemingly slain outright.

And with scarcely a mark, without his breath being perceptibly quickened, Jumping Jerry turned away with a short, hard laugh, casting over his shoulder:

"You gentlemen who picked out that handsome heifer as a pet, look after him at your leisure. He'll come 'round all sight with a little care. Then, tell him once more my conditions: Levant, and take the chances of my losing him, or remain and take the consequences. What will they be? To fight me with my own tools,

or have the whole rogues' gallery painted on his back in red ink with a bull-whip?"

Without pausing to see how this curt speech was received, Jumping Jerry strode into the cockpit and picked up his dead "pard," tenderly wrapping the silken kerchief around its stiffening form. As he turned to depart he found the colonel before him, his face grave and kindly:

A faint smile came into his own face as he shook his head in answer to that silent query.

"All I ask is to be let alone for a little, colonel," and then, with a softer tone, his hand came in contact with the honest palm of the ex-cavalryman: "You've treated me whiter than I had any right to expect, colonel, and I recognize in you what one don't often stumble across in these days—a true nobleman of nature's choicest brand. Still, I would rather be alone for a little. I'm going to plant my pard. It's only a gamecock, but he was my pard—true where others were false, always the same, and to be depended upon in—"

He turned abruptly away, walking swiftly from the town. The colonel watched him for a few moments, his own face grave and gentle. He could understand what the sport must feel at heart, though probably there was not another in Solid City who could. There was a portion of the same grief in his own heart as he turned away to pick up his dead champion; but he had other favorites, while Jumping Jerry had none.

And he knew that, as he strode away from the town and disappeared among the shrubbery and undergrowth which lined the hills, Jumping Jerry felt almost as a lonely widower might while following his only child to the grave.

And there, alone among the hills, Jeremiah Titus silently dug out a grave with his knife and his fingers, carefully placing in it the silk-shrouded gamecock. Beside it he lay the clipping-shears and the steel spurs, still reddened with the blood of his last rival. He covered its grave over when filled with a heavy flat rock, then sat and stared moodily for a time at the last resting-place of his pard.

"Anything but death at the hands of a drunken butcher, Dandy!" he muttered, frowning blackly. "In the pit, at the heels of a bird as game and as true as yourself, I wouldn't take it so hard! But that blustering tough—let him look out! If he don't take the hint and levant, he'll see how a Gamecock can fight!"

Never mind his leave-taking of his pard. It was earnest, sincere, true-hearted. He felt all he said, and much more; no need to put it in cold type for the idle to sneer or laugh at.

There were no signs of all this in his face as Jumping Jerry returned to Solid City that bright Sabbath afternoon. He was the same wildly reckless sport of the morning, seemingly without a care, seeking only to enjoy himself after his own peculiar fashion.

He proceeded direct to The Pit, but the colonel was absent. He cast a swift, comprehensive glance around him, as though more than half expecting to be met with black if not menacing looks. But the warm-hearted soldier had not been wholly idle during his absence, and even Bennett met him with cheerfulness that seemed genuine.

"Johnny, if my face is good for a round, sling out your tumblers in your most polished style," he cried, lightly, adding quickly: "Providing these gentlemen will honor me by joining me."

"Why not?" laughed Bennett, frankly. "If you did rather get away with us a bit ago, it's all in a lifetime, and that's too short to hold a grudge after it once gets cold. We'll drink to your health, and may our next meeting be just as full of sport, let the oro go which way the fates decide!"

"I'm glad to hear you say so," pointedly observed Jerry.

"And it's hearty, too, though I don't know as I can blame you for looking at it a little dubiously," laughed the other. "Any of the boys can tell you that I'm not, as a general thing, a crabbed loser, though a crooked spell did take me to-day. Can I say more?"

"Not another word," was the cordial reply as their hands met. "By the way, you put that battering-ram to bed?"

"Yes, and have a message from him to deliver. He swears by all that's evil he'll never rest until he gets even with you."

"You gave him my message?"

"And he swallowed the dose like a little man, too! You sobered him off with those love pats of yours, and he's more of a man than we any of us gave him credit for. He says he'll meet you with your own tools and lick you, too!"

"And I've a little word from Albino Dave," laughed another of the sports, with a quiet smile.

"The gentleman I happened to wipe my shoes on, out yonder?"

"The very same. He's a bit under the weather just now, but he asked me to put you on your guard. He'll go for you red-hot when you next meet; and he's a bad man to tackle, too, is Davey!"

"The more the merrier," lightly cried Jumping Jerry. "I'm the Gamecock from Sundown, and I always go heeled and trimmed, ready to take a fly for love or money with any one from death to the devil!"

CHAPTER X.

UNDER SENTENCE OF DEATH.

As the shades of evening deepened into night, there were dark and silent shapes gliding rapidly through the broken region lying to the north of Solid City. Here, there, singly and alone, seeming to prefer the dark and gloomy shadows to the silvery light cast down by the nearly full moon, and whenever forced by necessity to cross one of those mellow strips that relieved the darkness, increasing their pace and bowing their heads as though fearful of recognition, the shadows stole along until the general rendezvous was gained where their chief awaited them with steadily growing impatience. For this was not a chance meeting, that still, calm Sabbath evening.

Those shadows who came the earliest, settled down near the dark, silent figure sitting at the base of the broken-topped tree. Not a word was uttered by any of them, after the single terse signal that heralded their coming. Their chief was silent, and it was not for them to go contrary to his evident wishes.

"At last!" ejaculated the chief with something like a menace in his tones as he rose to his feet on the approach of another dark form. "Your bones are growing old and too stiff for active service, I'm fearing, brother! We have been waiting on your coming for more minutes than can well be spared."

"Yet I have lost little time," was the quiet, measured reply. "As soon as I caught sight of the signal flying, I slipped away from those who might have tried to follow me had I awakened their curiosity by acting in too great haste. Since I shook them, I've not let the grass grow very much under my feet."

The chief impatiently waved his gloved hand. "Let it pass. In my impatient anxiety I may have wronged you. If so, I beg your pardon. If not—so much the worse for you when the eyes of the brethren are fairly opened to the truth."

"I challenge the closest scrutiny into my actions, and—"

"I have said, let it pass for the present," sharply interposed the chief. "We have still more important business on hand for to-night—work that concerns the safety of our entire family."

"Of which work no single brother here present is more ready and eager to perform his share than the one whom you, chief, have insulted by vague words and hints that would better become both you and me were they placed into plain charges," hoarsely uttered the mask who had been last to reach the rendezvous.

"Once more, brother, forget my hasty words; or, if not forgot, keep them in the background until the business for which I summoned you here to meet me in council is finally disposed of. Then—you shall have full hearing and perfect reparation or just punishment, as your case may deserve."

"I ask nothing better," was the more cheerful reply.

The mysterious band stood beneath the shade cast around by the broken-topped tree which grew on a little knoll amidst that wilderness of rocks and evergreens. They seemed to be standing in the center of a vast amphitheater formed by stern nature. Around them, seeming far distant in the deceiving moonlight, were high walls of rugged rock, to scale which seemed beyond the power of mortal skill. Nearer, the rough, fantastically shaped rocks and huge boulders lay in thick profusion, softened and rendered almost graceful under that blending of light and shadow by the clambering vines and green shrubs.

A wild and lonely spot, and the last in all that wild region where one would expect to find an eavesdropper in hiding.

The half-score men gathered beneath the broken-topped tree, one and all wore masks over their faces; one and all were additionally disguised by their garments, some of which were turned wrong side out, others purposely rendered fantastic both in ornaments and manner of wearing, as though each member was trying to avoid recognition for the future even by those with whom he had sworn brotherhood and fidelity even unto death.

Tall, slender, lithe in build and motion, the chief stood in their midst, slowly, keenly scanning each brother in turn, as though his eyes which glowed and glittered through the twin apertures in his sable mask possessed the power to defy darkness and disguise. He seemed satisfied with his scrutiny, and then spoke, his tones clear and distinct though pitched in a guarded key:

"My brothers, this is no ordinary occasion. There is a great and imminent peril threatening us, from which only prompt and decided action can preserve us. Blood is fated to flow, but since that is the case, better our hands shed it than our veins lose it! Am I right?"

There was a prompt mutter of assent, and one masked man spoke:

"Your word is law, chief, and if you say kill, I, for one, will strike without stopping to ask why and wherefore."

"So say we all of us!" grimly uttered another.

"It is well; I expected no less, bearing in mind the tie that binds us together as but so many arms of a single trunk," quietly commented the chief of the little league.

A brief silence ensued, during which the brethren waited for their leader to divulge the danger that threatened them, while he seemed to be collecting his thoughts and getting them into a compact shape for their better consideration.

"My brothers," and his clear, mellow tones were cold and measured as he spoke again: "You all can bear witness that I have vigorously opposed all unnecessary violence in the carrying out of our plans for the equalization of fortunes. I have repeatedly warned you that there is no trail more easily and surely followed than that which is marked with human blood. My opinions have not changed in this respect, but now the time has come when we must kill, or be killed; when we can only save our necks from the noose, either of law or mob violence, by snuffing out the light of at least one human candle!"

"There is nothing in our laws that prohibits the shedding of blood, outside of our own brotherhood, I believe," coldly uttered the member who had been indirectly accused of lukewarmness.

"And you stand ready to strike the blow, brother?"

"If the lots so decide, I will not falter, though the one against whom the doom is pronounced be my own brother," was the cold reply.

"It is well, and you have our thanks, brother," gravely; "though, for that matter, I fear not but that one and all of us will prove full as faithful to our vows."

"I cast no doubt on others, chief; I simply spoke for myself."

"And spoke most nobly, too, brother!"

"If we say less, it is because we are waiting to learn just what danger threatens, just what work there is for our hands to perform," coldly uttered one of the other masked men.

"Listen, and you shall hear," quickly interposed the chief, seeming to fear an outbreak among his followers. "You have not forgotten how or why we were last forced to change our base?"

There was a low, threatening murmur among the masks; a sound that spoke louder, plainer than the wildest outburst of threats.

"It was an unnecessary question, I know," quickly added the chief, with a short, hard laugh. "But I had an object in putting it as I did. I wanted to remind you what we lost then: good and true brethren; the riches for which we had risked our lives time and time again; our snug and comfortable home, where we could lay in lazy security and laugh the bloodhounds of the law to scorn as they vainly tried to pick up the broken trail. And, too, I wanted to remind you of the man who at last ferreted out our cunning hiding-place; who brought the blood-suckers down upon us in the dead of night and left only a poor remnant of our noble family—and who hunted that remnant without mercy or relenting, only giving over when he could follow it no further!"

Again that low, ominous muttering.

"Only four of that grand, glorious band escaped the bloodhounds with life; only four, and those are all within the sound of my voice to-night."

"Those four have grown to ten, chief. And none of the younger brethren but feel just as deep and bitter hatred for the bloodhound of those days, as those can who heard him baying along the blood-trail," fervently uttered one of the men in masks.

"Not one but would give his own life to take that of the man who led the death-hunt, chief!" added another.

"If his name could only be discovered!"

"As I swore by the dead it should, sooner or later, though the cunning demon wore his mask so well!" sternly uttered the chief, his voice hard, yet with an exultant echo in it, his eyes fairly flashing fire as he added: "And now, brothers, I can tell you the name of the blood-sucker—I can point him out to you, alive and in the fleh!"

There was silence, deep and perfect, at this announcement; but it was a silence far more eloquent than simple speech.

"He was not content with the food he gave the rope in those dark days. He thought to repeat his bloody deeds, and has come to these parts to gather in the little remnant he missed that time. Then he was an amateur, hunting men down from pure love of blood; now he is a professional, and carries a commission as detective on his vile person!"

"Name! name!" muttered the masks hoarsely.

"He has one for every new locality he strikes, no doubt," with a hard laugh. "Then he was Perdue Flickinger; now, he calls himself Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown!"

There was a little stir among the masked men as though the title was not entirely unknown to them, and its pronunciation in that connection caused them great surprise.

"By the vows that bind me, I tell you this," gravely added the chief. "I say it, remembering the penalty that is attached to false infor-

mation calling for the action of the family; if I have spoken falsely, I call on you to award the punishment which I thus deserve."

"We hear, but we do not doubt, chief," was the grave response.

"The proof of my charge shall be forthcoming in good time. This is an emergency great enough to warrant me in claiming the delay provided for by our laws. You all know what little mercy we have to expect at the hands of a bloodhound of that breed. The past is evidence sufficient to convince the most skeptical. When he strikes, his blows fall thick and fast, and most deadly. He must not be given time to begin his bloody work. And so—what shall be done with him?"

"Give him the dose he is preparing for us—death!"

"I expected no less, but it was my duty to put the question," the chief laughed, his voice loud and grating. "Death it must and shall be; but our tracks must be covered over most carefully. He has allies, I am confident, though I am as yet unable to mention their names or point them out. I believe, though, that he is following the same line he laid out when he drew his bloody net before; that he is keeping all to himself until the net is surely set; that none of his allies know just what his plans are or whom he suspects."

"We take your belief as ours, chief. We have decided he must die; so he does die, it matters but little just how."

"I must differ with you there, brother," was the grave reply. "You know how important the work is we have in view. Should suspicion fall on us—should it even be thought this bloodhound owed his death to the fact of his being a detective—there would be a hue and cry raised that would almost certainly uncover some of our tracks. He must be removed, but with apparent openness. There must not be even the shadow of a suspicion attending the case. The laws which govern us as a family provide for just such an emergency, and as one subject to the same chances as the rest of you, I demand that we proceed under that law."

Silence reigned for a brief space. The masked men knew right well the meaning of that allusion. It startled them. Killing an enemy was not so much, when their own safety demanded it; but killing him under that law was a very different thing.

"It is the law, and I, for one, am fully prepared to take my chances with the rest," slowly uttered the mask who had last arrived.

The ice was broken. None of the others dared show sign of doubt or hesitation after that, and as with one accord they announced their readiness to abide by the decision of fate.

"We all know what that law is," gravely added the chief, baring his head as he spoke; in which he was promptly imitated by the rest. "Yet, as you also know, it is my sworn duty as your chief to place it distinctly before you before proceeding further. Ready, brothers?"

"We are ready, chief!" came the prompt response.

"Listen, brothers. A deadly peril threatens our very existence as a band of brethren, leagued together by the strongest ties human ingenuity can form. That peril must be averted, without casting even the shade of suspicion on the family. A man must die, but he must be slain by a single hand, and slain openly, on a pretext that will defy the closest scrutiny."

"The manner of his death is to be selected by the one on whom fate casts the duty of removing him. There is only one proviso: no time must be lost in carrying out the doom recorded against him."

"My brothers, are you ready for the ballot?"

"We are ready, chief!"

The leader of this grim league bowed, then covered his head and stepped out where the bright moonlight fell fairly upon his figure. He took from his pocket a number of small objects, and counted out one for each mask present, including himself. These he placed upon his flattened palm, and silently motioned the others to advance and inspect them.

They obeyed, one after another, moving around him in a circle. And by the clear moonlight they saw ten beans on his palm, one of them jet black, the others milk white.

"Brothers, do you find anything to object to, thus far?"

"We find nothing, chief."

He bowed, then stepped forward and took the hat from the head of one of the men before him. Inverting this, he slowly dropped the beans into its crown, counting them as he did so. The black bean was reserved until the last, and holding this up between his thumb and forefinger, so all could see, he slowly uttered:

"My brethren, this black bean is the death lot. One of our number must shortly draw it. It may be me, it may be you; one of us it must of simple necessity come to. And now, as I drop the death lot in the hat, swear with me that whomever fate selects as her tool, will prove faithful to his charge! Swear with me to cheerfully accept the duty this drawing presages, and bend every energy to making it a complete success. If I, or you, fail in this test, may the blades of the rest of the family meet in

the center of my heart—may my name and memory stand forever accursed as a coward, a recreant, a traitor, unfit to live, and worthy only of ten thousand deaths! Swear, brothers!"

"We swear!" was the prompt response in perfect unison.

"Let the sacred oath stand recorded until the death of enemy or of traitor blots it out forever!" sternly cried the chief, as he dropped the black bean into the hat with the rest, closing the soft brim and vigorously shaking them up together.

"Draw according to your numbers, brethren," he added, holding the hat with brim closed until only a slight opening remained. "And as your chief, I take my chance first—may it be the black bean!" he added, with a short laugh as his hand slipped into the receptacle.

But he did not immediately withdraw it, speaking again:

"Brothers, I omitted one portion which you might readily take for granted, but in such serious cases as this, perhaps it is better to be too explicit than to leave anything in the dark. Have I your permission to delay my drawing for a brief space?"

The masked men bowed, and the chief withdrew his hand, holding it up where all could see it was empty.

"Some of you may be aware of what occurred at The Pit this afternoon: those who are not, need only be told that Jumping Jerry, as our enemy now terms himself, has in a measure pledged himself to be at the same place to-night, to buck against the tiger. He will keep his word, and I don't know of a better place than that same for the favorite of fortune to tackle the fellow. There are so many chances for raising a dispute, where cards and liquor are getting in their work."

"Of course this is only a suggestion of mine, for I do not raise any claim to dictate; but I propose that the brother elected to snuff this odious candle take this same night to make the attempt; that he alone of all the band visit The Pit and make sure of his game. If the lot falls to me, I will agree to do so."

"And I," promptly added the last comer. "As well there as elsewhere. If Fate will it I am to die, die I will; if live, all the world can't alter the run of the cards."

The remaining members gave their assent, as well, and with a more cheerful air, the chief resumed:

"According to our laws, the result of this drawing remains a profound secret, so far as practicable. You will each one draw, keeping your lot hidden from all eyes save your own. You who take a white bean will know fate passes you by, but you can only guess at the chosen one. If there is any trickery, be sure time will expose it, and then—woe be unto the false one! He had better have never drawn the first breath of life!"

Then, amid the profoundest silence, the chief held up his empty hand where all could see. He slipped it into the hat, then withdrew it closed, holding it thus as he passed the hat from one to another of the band as they called out their numbers, from two to ten. Each man went through the same ceremony, to prove all was square, then, when the last lot was drawn, they turned away and left the spot without a word or sign that could denote the chosen instrument of fate.

Grim, silent, the masked chief watched them until the last shadowy shape vanished from view, before he opened his tightly clinched right hand and held it so the full rays of the moon fell upon it.

"Thank heaven! it is white!"

With a startled ejaculation he whirled around, his hand dropping to a pistol butt, only to rise again with a warning gesture as he rapidly muttered:

"You here, Ora! Silly child—"

A low, almost hysterical laugh made answer, as Ora Barcus came out from the edge of the shadows, saying:

"They are all gone, dearest, and can suspect nothing."

"But if they had discovered you! If they had—"

"What have I to fear, darling? You were here!"

"I could not have saved you, short of killing the whole outfit," was the softer return, as his right arm stole about her waist and drew her like form further back among the shadows. "It was a foolish risk, little one, and I would be awfully angry, if I were not so glad the peril has passed you by unscathed."

Ora stood on tiptoes, drawing his head lower with her arms wound about his neck, and for answer pressed her ripe red lips to his with a fervor that could not be mistaken. She loved him with all her passionate soul. He was all in all to her, poor child!

And he? He seemed to be quite as ardent, quite as earnest, returning her caress with a dozen for one. But for all that, his curiosity was little less warm, and he quickly asked:

"But you haven't explained, little one, how you came here. Why did you come? What have you heard?"

She nestled closer to his side, her curly head

pressing against his heart, her black eyes upturned with a half-roguish, half-reproachful light filling their misty depths.

"Everything, my chief! Not a word escaped my awfully sharp ears! And from this time on I consider myself a full and complete member of the family, entitled to talk, to vote, to do anything and everything the laws permit, save—oh, dearest! that frightful oath! that fearful lottery! If the horrible choice had fallen upon you!"

"You say you heard every word, little one," was the grave reply. "If so, you heard me swear. And I would have kept that vow, though I knew for a certainty I would be the one to die, instead of our enemy."

"But you drew a white bean? My hopes did not deceive my eyes?"

With a little laugh the chief stooped and picked up the bean, giving it to her as he added:

"Satisfy yourself, Ora; here it is."

She caught it from his hand, and pressed it to her lips, saying:

"I shall keep and wear it as a precious talisman, darling!"

"Very romantic, little one; but it would taste better boiled or baked in goodly company of the same ilk," he laughed, slowly moving away from the spot, after another keen, searching glance around them.

"You haven't made full and complete confession yet, Ora," he added in a graver tone. "How did you come to discover our secret?"

"I saw the signal flying. That told me part, and my wits soon made out the rest," was the laughing response. "I knew the signal meant a hasty and important summons for the band, and divining its purport, I determined to play the eavesdropper. It was not such a difficult task, after all, when the first few steps were taken. You should be more careful. Suppose I had been an enemy—that awful detective, say?"

"You ran a fearful risk, little one, and you must solemnly promise me you will never more be guilty of the like," he said, gravely.

Like a flash she confronted him, her face flushed and growing pale as death itself, her eyes glowing, her tones quivering as she said:

"Promise for promise, my husband! Is it a bargain?"

"I don't understand you, Ora!" he exclaimed, in a wondering tone.

"I hardly understand myself," with a short, hysterical laugh. "I have been half-crazy ever since that woman—she lied! I know it! And yet—you are not Perdue Flickinger?"

He stared at her for a moment in silence, then burst into a laugh.

"Jealous, little one? And of me—your loving husband?"

"No, I am not jealous. But you do not answer me?"

"I didn't realize the necessity of making an answer to such a ridiculous query, pet," he laughed. "Still, if it will ease your poor heart, I am not Perdue Flickinger."

"Nor her—her husband?"

"Nor her husband. How could I be, when you are my wife, pet?"

"I know—and yet—that picture! It was like, yet unlike you! And she was in sober earnest when she declared that it was the picture of Perdue Flickinger, of her husband."

"She lied, most likely," with a careless shrug of his shoulders. "Every woman will do it, sometimes, you know, little one."

"And men! George, look at me, let me see your face, your eyes," and with a swift motion she uncovered his dark, handsome face, gazing keenly, almost fiercely into his eyes with her burning orbs. "Swear to me that she is not, never was, aught to you, George! And beware! if you lie to me—if I find it out—my love will turn to intense hatred! I will kill you that very moment—then fill myself. I swear it!"

He stooped and kissed her pale, cold brow, saying lightly:

"Lie to you, little tigress? Well, hardly, after such a frightful warning as that!"

"Then it is false?" she persisted, though in a calmer tone, her head drooping toward his breast. "She lied to me?"

"Possibly not. She may have married Perdue Flickinger, for all I can say to the contrary. I can only swear that she is not my wife, never was my wife, never will be my wife. After you, little one? The bare idea is little short of libel!"

False or true, she believed him then, and as her head touched his bosom, her tears flowed freely. Let her faults be what they might, she loved him as few women are called upon to love in these days.

And he? His hand gently caressed the curly head. His strong arm wound about her waist, and as her face lifted, his lips met hers.

CHAPTER XI.

CONSUMPTIVE JOHNNY IN A PLAYFUL MOOD.

LIKE all the rest of the towns that depend solely on the mines and miners for the money that "keeps things going," Solid City knew the Sabbath Day only as a sort of "cleaning up day" only for the liquor and gambling saloons. Not in the sense a "tenderfoot" would naturally accept that technical term, but, as with the majority of claims where other than the primi-

tive pan and cradle or rocker are used in the extraction of the precious dust, it is the general custom to permit the gold to collect day by day until the end of the week, when comes the "cleaning-up" process, just so the "hells" rake in their greatest reward on the succeeding day, when "dust" is plenty and miners are wild for a "jolly time." And a digger must be miserably poor or wretchedly avaricious before he can bring himself to labor on the seventh day, even for double wage.

That Sabbath evening in Solid City was not an exception to the general rule. The "fun" began early, and bade fair to keep up late. Times were good, money plenty, and as a natural consequence business was booming wherever the "worm" or the "tiger" held forth their attractions.

As the 'way-up place of the rising little mining-camp, "The Pit" was an especial point of attraction to the fun-loving citizens, if anything rather more so than usual this evening. Though the events of that day had been witnessed by comparatively few, word had quickly spread on all hands, and many made it a point to visit the Pit in hopes of not only seeing the new "chief," but possibly viewing his downfall at the hands of Albino Dave or the red-haired giant from Last Chance. For the vows of both of these worthies were by this time general property.

Thus it was that Jumping Jerry, after supper at the Palace and a quiet cigar in company with the fat little host, found a more than usually hilarious gathering at The Pit for an hour so early in the evening.

He spent a few moments coolly glancing over the crowd from his position by the door, his own entrance having passed wholly unnoticed by friend or foe, thanks to the little by-play that was just then going on in a cleared place before the long bar.

In this space was a bent, round-shouldered figure, roughly clad, heavily shod, to judge from the sounds which followed his clumsy capering to the shrill whistling of the next most prominent character.

Jumping Jerry moved inside the door and to the left, where he was afforded a little better view, and a slight frown his shapely brows as he saw the dancer was a cripple, and that his wooden leg was doing the principal part of the pounding on the floor.

"It is such low, degraded brutes that I have to do my posturing before!" the Gamecock from Sundown muttered below his breath as he silently dropped into a chair near one of the little round tables. "Bah! it sickens me to think I am no better than the worst among them!"

In some manner best known to himself, Cripple Josey had eluded the watchful care of Ora Barcus, and naturally found his way to The Pit, where alone he seemed to find perfect happiness. But the path of stolen pleasure bade fair to prove unusually rough for the veteran that evening, for hardly had he entered the saloon before he was pitched upon by one who rarely deigned him even a passing glance or word.

John Tremain—"Consumptive Johnny," as he was best known in Solid City—was a character in himself, such as, fortunately for all human nature, rarely comes to the surface, even where the scum is thickest and foulest: a creature utterly without a heart, conscience, or a single redeeming quality. In one word, a moral monstrosity.

Every one in Solid City knew him, and nearly everybody feared him as well, much as they dreaded the treacherous copperhead that never gives forth warning before striking its poison-laden fangs into the quick. And yet, to look at him, a stranger would not set him down as at all dangerous, unless it was to the insurance company that had the ill fortune to carry his name on their list of risks.

His nickname was an unusually appropriate one, judging from all outward appearances. Johnny seemed with one foot already in the grave.

He was short and slight in figure, his chest hollow and his shoulders contracted. He had a "graveyard cough," hacking and raspy. His cheeks were sunken, a bright red spot marking each hollow with a hectic color. Dark circles surrounded his great black eyes. The cold dews of death seemed constantly on his brow, and his touch was cold and clammy.

But those who knew him best said he had looked like this for more years than they cared to number. Said that under that insignificant outside lay muscles of steel, full as springy, full as untiring. Said that a steadier or a surer hand never pulled trigger, handled steel or manipulated the painted papers. Yet even those who dwelt longest on these qualities were the very ones who avoided Consumptive Johnny when they could do so without too openly showing their distaste.

Perhaps Cripple Josey partook of this general mixture of fear and superstition, for he meekly submitted when Consumptive Johnny, with a show of facetiousness very rare in him, gently pulled the old man's long, straggling hair and in a low, strained voice peculiar to himself, begged him to favor the company with one of his inimitable jigs. Perhaps the poor fool really fancied himself the marvel of grace and agility the

burlesque-loving diggers had so often declared him.

It has already been said that he wore a wooden peg as a substitute for a crippled limb. This was his right leg, which was now doubled up at the knee, forming a right angle, resting in a hollowed, stuffed nest, which rapidly narrowed down until an iron-shod peg served as a foot.

Cripple Josey danced, while Consumptive Johnny whistled, the latter maliciously quickening his time until the drops of sweat fairly rolled down the hairy face of the cripple, and his arms, carried so jauntily at first, flapped and dangled about with sheer fatigue.

"That's the end o' the chune, Cripple Josey!" panted Barcus, with a longing glance toward the well-supplied bar and another of apprehension into the pale, bilious-looking face of the little sport.

"Just begun, Josey—dance on and show your agility, man! Dance, and show the citizens that one leg is better than two, when hung to the noble corporosity of Joseph Barcus. Dance, Josey, and don't put me out of tune, I beg of you!"

There was more in his tones than in his words. More in his glowing, wicked eyes than in either. And with a panting groan, the cripple resumed his clumsy gyrations, the white hair flying wilder than ever, the thump-thumping growing more and more irregular.

"Deed that is the end o' the chune, an' Cripple Josey knows it!" desperately gasped Barcus, reeling, staggering up to the bar, trembling in every limb, casting a look of doubt, fear and defiance toward his wickedly smiling tormentor.

"Give the gentleman his bitters, please," smiled Consumptive Johnny, as he slowly approached the bar himself. "Make it large and strong, with plenty of sugar, and charge the same to my account, please."

In silence the bartender obeyed. Colonel Fletcher had not yet put in an appearance for the evening, and he was but a hired hand. It was his business to supply whatever was ordered, and Consumptive Johnny was good for all he asked. As for Cripple Josey—let him take care of himself.

"An' I reckon I ained it, too, says Cripple Josey," panted the old fellow, wiping his streaming brow with a tremulous hand. "It was a monstrous hard chune you give me, lad, an' I don't reckon they's many lads o' my size an' weight an' age an' all as could 'a' done it up in style like that. No, sir, says Cripple Josey!"

It was sad rather than funny to see and hear the poor old wreck, and Jumping Jerry frowned darker than ever as he saw how maliciously the little sport eyed his victim.

When the large glass and bottle were placed before him, Cripple Josey caught at them eagerly with his unsteady digits, the neck of the decanter jingling sharply against the rim of the tumbler as he poured out a heavy dose of the liquid poison. He smiled vacantly as he cast a hurried glance around the little group, bowing repeatedly and mumbling an incoherent toast, then raising the glass with both hands toward his lips—but not to drink.

With a swift, dextrous motion, Consumptive Johnny dropped a tiny striped snake into the glass, when its frantic struggles to escape attracted the attention of the old man.

For a moment he glared at the reptile, clutching the glass as though his fingers would crush it to bits, his eyes distended, his face distorted, his entire frame shivering like one suddenly afflicted with the palsy. Then a harsh, grating shriek escaped his lips as he backed away from the counter, still clutching the glass, still glaring at the feeble struggles of the dying snake, holding it at arm's length, but apparently incapable of dropping it.

"Save me—save me!" he gasped, hoarsely, almost frothing at the mouth. "Take it away—it's got the eyes of the devil—take it away before it eats me up! I feel them crawling all over me! They're gnawing at my breast—they're creeping up—up—ah-h-h!"

A horrible groan burst from his lips—a groan that was blended with a shrill, mocking laugh from the lips of Consumptive Johnny, who moved toward his victim, saying:

"It's all imagination, Cripple Josey! You see no snakes. Swallow the good liquor, and I'll guarantee the serpents will trouble you no further. Swallow it, I bid you, man!"

With sudden sharpness came the last sentence, and those who had thus far looked on and laughed as at a huge joke, turned grave and uneasy. It was not often Consumptive Johnny assumed such a tone. When he did, trouble was sure to follow.

Little, insignificant as the sport appeared, none of them cared to step between him and his victim just then. They knew what a fatalist Consumptive Johnny was. They knew he believed an army could not kill him unless the time had come, written down at his birth, for his death.

Men with such beliefs are always dangerous, and Consumptive Johnny particularly so.

Possibly Cripple Josey thought of this, too, even in the light of his terror. He glared a little less wildly at the snake, now only feebly

moving, strangled by the fiery liquor. Perhaps he expected it to vanish, like so many unsubstantial visions do from the steady gaze of the hard drinker. But if quiet, it was still terribly, horribly real, and he shivered anew as Consumptive Johnny added sharply:

"Last call, Cripple Josey! Down with my treat, or I'll look upon it as a personal insult, to be rewarded accordingly!"

It was seldom that the bilious sport spoke so plainly. With him it was usually a blow without warning; and this deviation only impressed the lookers-on the more deeply. He must be terribly in earnest!

A low groan escaped from the pallid lips of the cripple, and he cast a hurried glance around him. Was it chance, was it the hand of fate that led his gaze to the pale, stern face of Jumping Jerry?

Be that as it may, a light came into the eyes of the old man, and reeling forward he gasped:

"Coax him not to—deed I can't swally it!"

With an icy smile Consumptive Johnny stepped forward, his white, thin hands hanging empty by his sides, but with a sharper threat than knives or pistols could convey, shooting from his glittering eyes.

"Drink my treat, Cripple Josey!"

"After you is manners, little runt!" cried Jumping Jerry, snatching the glass from the trembling hands, and flinging the snake and liquor full into the face of Consumptive Johnny.

Had the diminutive sport been more of a man in size and bulk, had he looked less like a perambulating moribund, doubtless the heavy glass would have followed the contents. As it was, Jumping Jerry looked just a little ashamed of himself as he dropped the empty glass on the table beside which he stood. Surely it would have been enough had he quietly warned the little rascal not to press his clumsy jest too far?

Keen judge though he prided himself he was of human nature in its most peculiar aspects, he did not understand this man. And his blue eyes opened widely in surprise as he saw how precipitately the crowd scattered to either side, leaving a space clear in line with the two men. Surely there was no fight in this little runt!

Consumptive Johnny never flinched an inch as the insult was flung fully in his face. Slowly he drew a little white handkerchief from his breast pocket, deliberately wiping his face, his glittering eyes all the time riveted on the handsome countenance of the Gamecock from Sundown.

He made no movement to draw a weapon, though those who knew him best felt sure he could do so and use it before even the active Gamecock could make a motion to defend himself. They anticipated just such a move, and for that reason they were so active in clearing the track which the expected bullets might take.

Instead, Consumptive Johnny finished drying his face, wiped his soiled linen as best he might, picked the dead snake from his bosom and quietly coiled it around one thin forefinger, all the while gazing with those brilliant black orbs full into the face of his insurer.

Despite his iron nerve, Jumping Jerry began to feel a trifle uneasy at this strange behavior, so different from what he anticipated. Not that he even yet realized the truth, or dreamed of fear for himself. Had any one suggested such a thing, he would have laughed it to scorn. Danger, and from that insignificant little animal? Bah!

As though he read something of this in that handsome countenance, Consumptive Johnny smiled, coldly, almost as one might, in a frightful nightmare, imagine a corpse to open its eyes and smile on its destroyer. He bowed, politely, his tones low and smooth as oil:

"I'm only a poor, consumptive little cuss, sir. I have only one lung, and that is half gone. The doctor says my complaint will be hastened if I am crossed in my little whims. I don't suppose you thought of that when you took it on yourself to interfere between me and my honest friend, Cripple Josey?"

Jumping Jerry was taken just a little aback by this curiously worded remonstrance. Consumptive Johnny was proving himself, as he had to many another man in his short career, a perplexing enigma to the Gamecock from Sundown.

"There's reason in all things, little one," he bluntly responded as he saw the diminutive sport was pausing for a reply. "If not, it's the duty of every man to do his best to regulate matters. You were crowding your little joke clear past the last boundary of reason. Fun is fun, and I like it in its pure state as well as the next man, but when a spoiled child carries matters as far as you attempted, even a stranger is justified in taking a hand in the game—and using that hand right on the spot it does a fretful child the most good to have sharply caressed, too!"

Consumptive Johnny smiled icily, seemingly more amused than hurt or offended. And thus Jumping Jerry was more astonished than ever as he saw Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher come hastily toward them, his stern face pale and anxious, his right hand clutching the butt of a revolver.

"Keep your hands empty, Johnny Tremain, or I'll break my own rules and scatter your brains all over the floor!" the old soldier cried, harshly, as he paused with the muzzle of his pistol almost touching the temple of the little sport.

Then Jumping Jerry began to better realize the metal of the one with whom he had so unexpectedly become embroiled. Not a nerve trembled, not a muscle changed, save that the icy smile grew just a thought more visible as Consumptive Johnny turned his face toward the colonel. And his tones were as smooth and even as at first.

"You chip into a private game, without so much as a wink by way of invitation, colonel? A bad example to set your patrons, isn't it?"

The colonel glanced uneasily from one face to the other. He had not seen the beginning. He knew what a deadly rascal the little sport was, and thinking only of the good of his newly-made friend, feeling sure he would underestimate the insignificant looking desperado, he cut in without stopping to ask which man was in the right. That cool retort, backed by a still cooler insolence of tone and look, confused him just a trifle, but he quickly rallied and said:

"I permit no quarreling in my house, sah, as you are very well aware. As long as you submit to those rules, you are free to come and go as you please. When you transgress them, sah, it is time for me to interfere."

"He is not altogether to blame, colonel," frankly interposed Jumping Jerry, only to have Consumptive Johnny blandly interrupt him in turn with:

"Save your breath to defend yourself, please, for I promise you you will need it all before I'm done with you. You have insulted me, and poor, insignificant weakling though I am, unless you get down on your knees and humbly beg my pardon, I'll be obliged to plant you in my own little garden of stiffs."

So soft his voice, so gentle his smile, so bland his bow, that the Gamecock from Sundown stared at him like one in a dream. He could not fully trust the evidence of his own senses, and mechanically closed thumb and finger tip on his thigh to make sure he was awake.

Consumptive Johnny laughed, broken short by a hacking cough.

"Is your hearing defective, dear sir? Shall I hire a brass band to repeat my little song in louder accents? Surely, a great big man like you cannot be so cowardly as to be stricken dumb with fear by one of my slight caliber?"

"Once more, sah, this quarrel shall go no further!" sternly uttered Fletcher, when Consumptive Johnny turned his smile that way, saying:

"You can't stop it without using your pistol as you threatened a bit ago, colonel. Unless, indeed, your friend can find his knees as—"

"Do it, boss, do it in a hurry, afore he kills ye!" muttered a husky voice in the ear of the bewildered Gamecock. "He's bloody-turrible when he gets under full way—deed he is, says Cripple Josey!"

Jumping Jerry turned his face, half-laughing at the pitiful face he saw before his own. The cripple was trembling worse than ever, his gaze seemingly fascinated by the glittering black eyes in the head of the diminutive fire-eater.

"Do it—do es he says, boss! You needn't be ashamed. They ain't sca'cely a critter in the house but would do it rather than hev the little devil spittin' pizen onto him! Do it—or your blood'll be onto my pore ole gray ha's, says Cripple Josey!"

"Good advice, sir," smiled Consumptive Johnny, whose keen ears had no difficulty in making out the words uttered in that exaggerated whisper which has been alluded to before. "Better kneel for a minute than lie at full length for all eternity! Beg, or I'll kill you."

Jumping Jerry laughed harshly, almost angrily.

"Why, blest if I don't begin to believe the little scrub actually believes the threats he mouths!"

"You shall be the most prominent witness to the truth of them, my dear sir," bowed the little fire-eater. "Once more, you have insulted me. You crossed my path when better men dared not. You took the liberty to spill the liquor my money pays for. You even spilled a little of it into my face, and made me cough. The accident might be passed over, but the injury never. I have but one lung, and that is nearly gone. Coughing injures it and pains me. Therefore, as I had the honor to observe once or twice before, you go down on your knees and meekly beg my pardon, or I will kill you. Like a cur, if you have neither the sense nor the courage to demand of me satisfaction for—this!"

With a motion swift as light itself the little fire-eater leaped forward and slapped the face of Jumping Jerry twice, springing back as lightly, standing with folded arms, smiling blandly.

The action was so sudden and wholly unexpected that not even the quickness with which the Gamecock was gifted could save him. He staggered, not from the force of those blows,

though the slender fingers left their prints in scarlet on the smooth cheeks, but from combined surprise and shame.

For one moment he seemed about to leap upon his assailant and crush him to the floor, but then he drew back, forcing a smile, putting both hands behind him, the better to resist that awful temptation. He could not strike one who stood with empty and folded hands. But something of his hatred showed in his voice as he spoke:

"Name your tools, and I'll give you all the satisfaction you can wish, sir. I only make one condition: let it be right soon."

"Not too soon, if you please!" uttered a clear, hard tone, as a tall figure strode into the saloon, pausing when fairly within the clear light. "I believe I hold the ace in this little game, and I'm here to back that privilege with my life, if needs be!"

The speaker was Albino Dave, the faro dealer, still pale from the effects of the rude lesson Jumping Jerry had read him that afternoon.

CHAPTER XII.

ALBINO DAVE PLAYS TO GET EVEN.

WITH a single swift bound, Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown, cleared the distance separating him from the side wall of The Pit, and with his back to this, his hands each clasp the butts of cocked revolvers, he stood at bay, one man against he knew not how many.

"Cool and easy lasts longer than hot and hasty, gentlemen!" he cried, his tones as clear and metallic, his big blue eyes conveying a warning to the full emphatic as the silent ones of the dark tubes. "I'm a man with a constitutional objection to being crowded, and when a gang persist in making themselves too numerous for comfort, I do my level best to eat my bigness through the line where it comes handiest. If you want to dance to my music, pitch your tune and I'll make it quick and devilish enough for the nimblest heeled varlet amongst ye all!"

Consumptive Johnny had quickly slipped his hands into the pockets of his light sack coat, and now stood facing midway between the last arrival and the Gamecock, still smiling blandly but with the vicious glimmer deepening in his jetty orbs.

Albino Dave stood just within the swinging screens, cold and seemingly passionless as when filling his accustomed seat opposite the players at a faro lay-out. His hands were empty, one hanging carelessly at his side, the other slowly smoothing his milk-white mustache as his pale pinkish eyes steadily regarded the sport from the Occident. About his waist was buckled a belt of weapons such as few, if any, in Solid City had ever seen him sport so openly, but he made no effort to draw knife or pistol, nor did he flinch in the slightest as one of those business-like muzzles stared him full in the face.

Colonel Fletcher was taken aback quite as wholly as any other man in the room, although he knew that Albino Dave had openly declared his intention of getting even for the overthrow he had that day met with at the hands (or heels) of the Gamecock. But his hesitation lasted only a moment, and then he strode swiftly between the occidental sport and his new antagonist, speaking sharply:

"This must not, shall not go on, gentlemen! It is against the rules of the house—as none know better than you, Dave!"

The Albino bowed, respectfully, his voice coming calm and even:

"Begging your pardon, colonel, but I believe I have kept within the rules, so far. I have dealt no blow, uttered no oaths, fired no shot. I have simply put in my claim as holding first mortgage on the life of yonder swaggering sport. I have given the warning that after me is manners. Those who neglect it, or try to jump my claim before I have worked it to my satisfaction, will have to call and settle the moment they set foot outside of your jurisdiction."

Jumping Jerry laughed shortly, sneeringly, his worst passions seemingly coming to the surface once more.

"You crow loud, my chicken, but I've seen dung-hills do as well!"

Albino Dave flashed a burning glance toward the speaker, his full chest swelling a little more as though to invite the bullet he dared:

"You should be a good judge of your own class, sir. Shoot! and brand yourself a coward in the eyes of all honest men!"

The milk-white sport was gritty, no doubt of that. He knew that Jumping Jerry would be fully justified in shooting him down at sight, armed or unarmed, since he had sent him plain warning that their next meeting would be to the death. The only verdict from the lips of his own guild would be "served him right for shooting off his mouth before his gun!"

But he counted aright when he took that bold stand. Jumping Jerry lowered his revolver, with a half-bow and a light laugh, though he still kept Consumptive Johnny covered with the other weapon.

"Lord bless you, Whitey, I never burn powder when I can possibly get along without it," he laughed, mockingly. "But as a strange cock in a foreign walk, I have to keep my eyes

open and my heels ready for a fly with whoever tries to jump me as an alien. You crew so sharp that it fairly lifted me in my shoes and whirled me into this corner before I knew it. If I frightened you, I'm awful sorry for it!"

Colonel Fletcher, sorely perplexed and at a loss just what to do in his wish to untangle matters, moved toward the Gamecock, and Albino Dave turned toward Consumptive Johnny, his voice grave and hard:

"I don't want to cross you, pard, if I can help it, but you saw what happened in the cockpit this afternoon, and you knew what word I sent back to the dandy with his nimble heels. My claim heads yours, Johnny."

"If I'm not inclined to give way?" softly smiled the bilious little fire-eater. "You'll brush me aside, I suppose?"

The Albino flushed a little at those insolent tones and looks, but he managed to keep his temper under control.

"Not that, exactly, Johnny, but I'll tell you what I will do: I'll fight you at your own game for the first chance at the fellow!"

Jumping Jerry heard all this, and his hot anger gradually gave way to a sense of grim humor. Rumor had not spoken falsely when she declared Solid City was just bubbling over with pure fun! He had come there in search of sport, so he had declared. Well, he was in a fair way of getting all the most ardent could wish. Already the citizens were fighting to see which should have the honor of slitting his throat or perforating his brain-pan! What more could a man desire?

The peculiar situation drew a laugh from his lips, and it was with a mock gravity that he hailed the polite disputants with:

"Haven't I any say-so in this little jamboree? Won't you allow me the simple privilege of selecting the executioner?"

"If you dare venture out from under the sheltering wing of the colonel for a few moments, perhaps we can settle that point to your satisfaction, sir," bowed Consumptive Johnny, smiling softly.

Jumping Jerry grew grave and earnest as he put up his weapons and gently placed his hands on the shoulders of the old soldier whom he already respected and was rapidly learning to love.

"It has got to come, my friend, and the sooner it is over the better for all concerned. We'll respect your house, but don't interfere further on my account. It only gives them an excuse for insults."

"Confound the house!" impulsively cried the veteran, carried away by his honest indignation, mingling with a strangely powerful interest in this reckless fellow whom, only a few short hours before, he had regarded with a disgust that was little short of loathing. "It's you I'm thinking most about, sah. A stranger, and to be so abominably imposed upon under my roof, sah!"

"I am quite able to take care of myself, colonel," a little stiffly muttered Jumping Jerry, flushing a trifle as he saw Consumptive Johnny laughing maliciously. "If you are a friend, don't interfere any further."

"Look out for the little devil, then!" hastily whispered the ex-cavalryman. "Albino is bad enough, but Johnny is rank poison!"

With a sudden movement Jumping Jerry set him to one side, moved forward and confronted the two men who seemed bent on laying his life.

There was a pleasant smile on his face, and his voice was wholly free from passion as he quietly uttered:

"Well, gentlemen, have you decided which one of you is to add my name to your list of dead men?"

Consumptive Johnny coughed behind one thin hand, then bowed:

"Not quite; but what will it matter to you, my dear sir? It is Heben's choice with you—if Albino don't kill you, I will."

"And I haven't a whisper in the argument, even?"

"Only as a matter of form—a dying confession, so to speak."

This was so deliciously cool, coming from a source so contemptible in outward seeming, that even the Gamecock was taken a little aback for an instant. But he was "nervy," to use the vernacular, and quickly rallied again.

"Well, suit yourselves, gentlemen, so you settle the dispute with as little loss of time as may be possible. I've more important matters on hand."

"Which your executor will have to attend to. Now, David—"

For once the little fire-eater was caught off his guard. While bowing to Jumping Jerry he had taken his hands out of his pockets, and now, as he turned again to the white gambler, he found himself covered by a big-bored derringer in the hands of one whose blazing eyes told he meant business from the word go!

"I reckon you'd better take a back seat for a bit, Johnny, and wait until the age has spoken. Follow the rules, even though you don't get a smell at the pot!"

No one offered to interfere between the men now. Colonel Fletcher smiled grimly as he

folded his arms. He valued Albino Dave as a good dealer of faro, and one who knew more than the common run of men about handling a gamecock; but Jumping Jerry had shown himself a still better fancier, and he was quite content to see the two wolves devour each other, since they must flesh their fangs.

Consumptive Johnny did not smile now. His eyes glittered more vividly than ever, and he showed his white teeth after a wicked fashion. But he never flinched, never showed a trace of personal fear, and his tones were cold and even as ever.

"What is to be will be, Davey, lad, and if my time hasn't come, you can't kill me. All the same, if your man enough to give me half a show, I'll match you the best I know how."

"When I settle with this gentleman, Johnny," was the quiet retort. "I've got the first claim on him, and when you try to cut in between, don't squeal if you burn your fingers."

"Oh, I'm not squealing, Davey," with a low laugh. "And I'm open to reasonable arguments all the time. Suppose we compromise?"

"Anything that won't set back my turn with the Gamecock, Johnny."

"I won't ask that. You can't overturn him unless it is so written. If he's got your mark, I couldn't take him from you anyway. Will you just lower the mouth of that persuader of yours a trifle, pard?"

Albino Dave promptly did so, though still holding himself in readiness to meet and foil any treacherous attempt to even matters. But apparently Consumptive Johnny had other views, for he quietly added:

"All I particularly care for in life is a little fun, pard. You know what the medical sharp said: one lung gone, the other going. A short lease of life, that ought to be petted and coddled and amused. That hits me—amusement! It's food and drink to me, pard. And, since you are so urgent, I give way to you as the elder hand. I reckon it'll be sport enough to see one of you kill the other. If both should fall, I'll seek consolation in giving the remains a glorious send-off. If only one—I'll humbly beg him to share a new sensation with me."

With a languid wave of his thin white hand, Consumptive Johnny bowed low, then turned partly away, for a better light in which to select a cigar from his embroidered case.

While this unique dispute was in progress, Jumping Jerry stood quietly by, closely watching the two men and summing them up as best he might.

The cool insolence with which they entirely ignored his presence or his claims, irritated him not a little, though he suffered naught of this to show itself on his face. He heard and saw enough to prove them utterly devoid of mercy, bent on his death; he felt that he must either kill or be killed, and more than once he was powerfully tempted to interrupt the disputants after a fashion that would bring the matter to the test off-hand. Still, he succeeded in keeping his control, and as Consumptive Johnny withdrew his claims to precedence, he put in:

"Have you quite decided my fate, my dear sir?"

"That you have got to fight me or prove yourself a coward of the very first water," coldly bowed the Albino.

Jumping Jerry shrugged his shoulders significantly, then his tones grew harder, his face sterner, as he added:

"I didn't come to Solid City to fight the entire community, but, all the same, I'm not of runaway stock. I'm game from comb to spur, as I hope to prove, if your climate don't cut me off in the opening of my glorious career. I'll fight you, with your own tools and on your own terms, provided—"

"Provided I promise not to aim at your precious carcass, or to use blank cartridges?" sneeringly interrupted Albino Dave.

If it was his hope to nettle or rattle the Gamecock from Sundown, he was fated to disappointment. Jumping Jerry laughed lightly, without a trace of anger or irritation in face, tone or manner.

"Don't flatter yourself that I'm going to let you down so easy as all that comes to, Whitey! I'm a butcher from Slaughter House, and I never drink anything less sanguinary than a cup of human blood, fresh drawn, from veins of my own opening!"

"A windmill from Gusti Gulch, rather?"

"Just as you prefer, Snow-crest; I'm not at all particular, just so you'll borrow sufficient politeness from some stranger to suffer me to unfold my little budget. Yes, I'll fight you, when, where, how you elect, on the one condition that you give me the same privilege of naming my choice of weapons for a second fly, should we both come out of the first one in condition to crow with our own lungs. Is it a whack?"

Albino Dave laughed, softly, coldly, without even the ghost of merriment in his tones.

"I can safely promise you all that, and much more, if you insist, for one or both of us will never see the sun rise in the morning!"

"That may be, since I'm a lazy sleeper when my head does seek the pillow," coolly retorted Jumping Jerry. "I give my host standing

orders not to shove breakfast under my nose until the sun begins looking for the dinner-bell."

"Which you will never live to hear rung, sir."

"That's your say-so," and Jumping Jerry carelessly turned on his heel and addressed Fletcher: "Colonel, will you kindly arrange matters for my part in this little circus? I hate to trouble you, but, really, I'm afraid to ask any other gentleman present, lest I stir up another hornet red-hot to show me the length of his probe!"

"If it cannot be settled without an appeal to arms, sah," bowed the old soldier, his face grave and troubled. "David, lad—"

The albino coldly shook his head in answer to the incomplete question. He would listen to no compromise. The colonel bowed stiffly as he added:

"Then, sah, you have but to mention your friend."

"There is no necessity for so much ceremony, unless, indeed, the other principal insists upon it. For my part, I'm more than willing you should take complete charge," quickly uttered the gambler.

"Second the motion!" ejaculated Jumping Jerry. "The colonel for referee, judges, handlers, and all in one—and a model edition he will make, too! You, Pink-eyes, nominate your tools, and then for a fly!"

"Pistols are good enough for me, sir."

"And I reckon I can worry along with them, somehow. Take your position, and whisper when you reckon I'm close enough to your battery for a sure pot-shot. Oh, I'm just hungry for a high lot of hillside, where my blessed toenails can tickle the roots of the ox-eyed daisies and make them split all over in blossoms!"

The colonel stood in silent horror. A devout believer in "the code," with all its punctilious ceremony, this off-hand recklessness for the moment paralyzed him, and it was not until Albino Dave was stepping off his distance that he could find his tongue again.

"Gentlemen, hold! This is outrageously shameful, and I'll never permit such—such—confound it, sah! I'll shoot the first man that says a word until I give him permission, sah!"

He strode forward and caught Albino Dave by the arm, then glared savagely upon the Gamecock, who with difficulty stifled a laugh.

"All right, colonel, and we're yours to command," he laughed, a little mischievously, his eyes twinkling. "You know I came from the wrong side of the line, and can't be expected to behave myself according to the rules that govern southern chivalry."

That was not his prime reason, as may be readily divined. He saw that Colonel Fletcher was about to decline the position he particularly wished him to occupy, and took this method to fully commit him. It was a successful ruse, and now he was content to rest his tongue.

In brief, dignified sentences, the colonel made known the conditions which should govern the duel.

"Since you have cast the entire responsibility upon my poor shoulders, gentlemen, I will announce the conditions. You will fight with firearms. You will select each a revolver to suit your taste, and may use your own tools, provided the other does not object. If either should object, I will furnish tools equally unfamiliar to you both."

As he paused, with a look that seemed to invite their decision, the Gamecock from Sundown bowed toward Albino Dave, saying:

"Let the gentleman decide; I have no particular preference."

"I prefer my own tools."

"Let it be so, then," nodded Jumping Jerry.

"That point is settled, then," resumed the colonel. "You will be stationed back to back, at a distance of twenty paces. You will each man have a single revolver, giving up all other weapons before you take your positions. You will wait for the word, which will be: 'Ready? One, two, fire!' At the first word you will wheel, and fire the first shot between that and the word fire. Bear this point distinctly in mind, for I pledge you my word of honor, both, that I will shoot down the one who dares to violate it, save by a misfire! You understand, gentlemen?"

A simultaneous bow answered him, and the colonel resumed:

"After the first shot each, you are at perfect liberty to fire at will, even until the last shot is expended, if one or both does not fall before. A fall ends the affair. A shot after that will be deemed assassination, and rewarded accordingly."

"And the place, colonel?" asked Jumping Jerry.

"Outside, sah, of course. No man fires a shot within these walls, unless I pull the trigger," a little stiffly.

"That's all right, so far as I am concerned; but the gentleman? His eyes appear to be weak, and I accept odds from no man."

Albino Dave smiled mockingly as he retorted: "Never you borrow trouble on my account, dear sir. I'm a bit of a cat, so far as seeing in the dark is concerned, and my lead will find you all the more surely out yonder than in here. But if you object—"

"I never object," just as coolly uttered Jumping Jerry. "I'm a bit of a 'blinker' myself, and when I have to fight in the dark, I just shut my other eye and go by instinct. If I don't get there, I'll try mighty hard."

"Then, I believe, there is nothing more to arrange before getting down to sober business," remarked the colonel.

"Only this," and as he spoke, Jumping Jerry cast a swift, comprehensive glance about the room, his gaze resting longest on the pale, bilious looking face of Consumptive Johnny. "All I ask for is a fair field and no favor. It is a right which belongs to any man, and, gentlemen, one and all, that right I'll have, or some of you will be past explaining why!"

"If your hint is addressed to me, my dear sir," bowed Tremain, with just the suggestion of a sneer in voice and smile, "it is I leath wasted. It's fun I'm after, and I've already arranged a neat little programme in which I expect your assistance after you have fixed our mutual friend Albino Dave for planting in a high lot."

"Look out that I don't see yours dug, Johnny," laughed the colorless sport as he turned on his heel and left the room, having been searched by the colonel for extra weapons in the mean time.

Jumping Jerry also submitted to the same process, and when the colonel expressed himself satisfied, they joined arms and passed out of the saloon under the clear light of the moon.

A more favorable night could not have been selected for such an affair, all things considered. Not a cloud marred the pure heavens. The atmosphere was unusually clear and thin, while the stars and the nearly full moon shed a light over the earth that almost equaled that of the early sun.

The street before The Pit was level and unobstructed, of ample width both for the duelists and the spectators. And with a practiced eye, Colonel Fletcher saw that almost anywhere, within a moderate distance from The Pit, the principals could be stationed with nothing to either aid or impair their aim.

Little time was cut to waste. The colonel, while deeply regretting the necessity, knew that it must come off, and so thought it better to make a clean, quick job of it.

He paced the distance, personally pacing each man, back to back, repeating his grave warnings, then fell back to give the word. Almost instantly it came as arranged—and with the first word blended a clear, high-pitched voice uttering the words:

"Perdue Flickinger! at last, my husband!"

Jumping Jerry started while wheeling, seemingly scared or surprised, then as a clear crack came, he staggered back as though hard hit!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GAMECOCK SCORES ANOTHER WIN.

An expert with the pistol and an accomplished snap-shot, Albino Dave had every muscle strained in readiness to wheel and fire the instant the voice of Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher should give the first word of the agreed-upon signal. He did so, and was probably the only man in all that crowd who failed to hear the strange words uttered by that feminine voice, for he saw Jumping Jerry start and stagger, partially throwing up one hand without discharging his weapon or attempting to secure an aim, and then his forced composure gave way in a yell so loud and piercing, so full of intense hatred and ferocious exultation, so merciless that it might well have proceeded from the throat of a full-blooded savage on the war-path.

He leaped swiftly forward, eager to make sure of his deadly work before the Gamecock from Sundown could either rally or fall sufficiently low to come within the protection afforded by the terms set forth by Fletcher before the duel began. There was murder in his heart, for he believed his antagonist already disabled if not slain outright.

But then, almost ere that wild yell had crossed his lips, the Gamecock from Sundown rallied, sending forth a clear, defiant cock-crow as his right arm shot to a level and a stream of bright flame came from the obedient weapon.

A wild cry followed, and it was the turn of the colorless sport to start and stagger, his pistol dropping from his hand, which was caught by its fellow, quivering with pain, freely shedding blood, for the moment utterly helpless.

"Slow and easy gets there first, my dandy sport with the pink eyes!" cried Jumping Jerry, standing alert and watchful, his weapon half raised, his blue eyes glowing in the clear moonlight as they watched the movements of his adversary. "Come to Limerick, honey! Cripple Josey will have to look to his laurels as a jiggist if you keep on practicing that light fantastic step of yours! It's awfully amusing, but it ain't exactly business, you know, pretty boy!"

Neither was the dashing sport from the far West proceeding exactly according to Hoyle in the eyes of the lookers-on, nearly all of the great majority of whom confidently expected to see privileges accorded the luckiest man pressed to the very utmost. Was the Gamecock mad in good earnest, that he did not make sure of his

foe while he had everything in his own favor? Why didn't he send one more bullet home where it would do the most good, and then take his own time to crow and make merry?

It was his right, fully understood before a grain of powder was burned. It was what Albino Dave fully intended doing, had not his hopes been knocked into a cocked hat by the sudden and marvelous recovery of the one whom he had already set down as good as a dead man.

Instead, Jumping Jerry stood watching the white-faced sport, his revolver ready, but idle. It was magnanimous, but—not business!

A quick, gasping breath hissed through the excited spectators as they saw Albino Dave suddenly stoop and snatch at his pistol with his still sound left hand, and more than one among them, forgetting time and place, actually parted their lips for the purpose of warning the Gamecock from Sundown that the gambler was ambidextrous, when they were spared the trouble and the breach.

Jumping Jerry knew full well what he was about. For one brief, almost fatal moment he had been thrown off his guard, but since then his every movement was carefully calculated with an eye to the future as well as the present. He knew that he was gaining his way with the higher class of sports in Solid City, and for reasons which need not be more elaborately touched in this connection, he wished to make his foothold secure, even though in accomplishing this he ran a little extra risk.

He caught the dim sparkle of the moon's rays as they fell across the diamond ring worn by Albino Dave on his left hand, and that was sufficient for one of his keen vision and marvelous skill. And as the pale sport grasped his revolver it was only to drop it again with a wild, hissing oath of mingled pain and savage hatred.

He rose erect, his blood-streaming hands quivering in the moonlight above his head, his ghastly pale face frightfully distorted and his voice barely recognizable by those who knew him best, crying:

"Once more, you devil! One more shot, and send your lead home to the heart of the man you have crippled for life! Kill me—end it at a blow—split my heart, if you are not a coward as well as a low-lived, juggling hound! Crippled—crippled for life! Ten thousand curses sink you a million miles deep in the lowest, hottest pits of hell, if you shrink from ending all with a shot that will be a mercy!"

It was a strange scene, a stranger's speech, and few there were who heard that strained, agonized tone, who saw that frightfully distorted face, but felt the blood curdling in their veins.

Albino Dave stood facing his successful adversary, who, rigidly erect, watched him in utter silence, his revolver resting with its muzzle bent back to his right shoulder, his blue eyes glowing vividly, the personification of watchfulness. Only until he made sure there was no trickery about that impassioned appeal. Then, a low, mocking laugh parted his lips as he distinctly cried:

"Very dramatic, my dear fellow, but don't you think you're seeking sympathy on a rather slim pretense? Crippled for life? Not a bit of it, man! You'll be rippling the pasteboards as deftly as ever before another month rolls over your head, and there's a heap fight in you yet if triggers are barred out."

"Kill me, or I'll kill you, devil!" hoarsely cried the gambler.

"Not this evening, thank you, my pretty lad with the pink eyes," laughed the cool sport from the Occident. "You can make your bow to the audience, and hunt your hole. Let a medical sharp tinker you up a little, and remember that I still hold a claim on you, as per agreement, duly witnessed and recorded in the minds of these gents. Ta-ta, pard!"

Jumping Jerry touched the tips of his fingers to his lips, blowing a kiss to his defeated antagonist, then took Colonel Fletcher by the arm and moved toward the saloon, his nimble tongue rattling on as though hung in the middle until, with an abrupt start he seemed to remember something, and hastily excusing himself, dropped the arm of the veteran cock-fighter, striding swiftly away through the night.

The instant he gained the deep shadows cast by the tall building containing the saloon, he paused and glanced slowly, keenly around him, searching for a figure which failed to meet his eyes. He frowned darkly, his brows contracted, his face very stern and merciless just then.

"Who was it? A woman, sure; but was it earnest, or only a vile trick to throw me off my guard? Did she call to me, or to the real Perdue Pickinger? I'd give a trifle to know even that much!"

Judged by the expression of his face just then, that "trifle" might easily be stretched to cover a vast deal. If ever man was in deadly earnest, Jumping Jerry filled the bill at that moment!

He shifted his position, carefully keeping as well-covered as possible, looking in vain for the figure of a woman and only ceasing when the fruitlessness of his quest was borne in upon him, lightened by a sudden happy thought that found expression in muttered words:

"The dainty lady has given me the slip for now, but I'll not grope in the dark much longer. Some of the sports present must have noticed her, and their tongues will wag freely to-night. If not—Solid City can't be blessed with so many of the fair sex but that an industrious youth can manage to interview them to the last syllable before dying of old age! Reckon I'll go see what has come of my bilious looking friend who carries rattlesnake poison in his black eyes!"

No sooner decided than acted upon, and in a very few moments Jumping Jerry was once more within the walls of The Pit, where he was warmly greeted by Colonel Fletcher. Many were the curious and not unkindly looks bent upon the dashing sport from Sundown, for his fearless demeanor had "hit the crowd right where they lived!" But there was one at least present who seriously objected to his being made a popular idol of, and Jumping Jerry was not yet entirely through the breakers.

Really the fatalist he made pretensions to being, Consumptive Johnny Tremain had watched the duel with cool enjoyment, feeling that what was to be would be, let mere mortals strive how they might to alter the course of events. This, too, had made him yield when Albino Dave so adroitly secured the "drop" on him, and not through any personal fear of death. Nor did he give a single thought as to what his fellow sports might say or think. He knew he had made a record that barred out all charges of cowardliness or lack of nerve.

He was a peculiar character, this feeble-looking desperado, and one with very few parallels in the annals of desperadoism, fortunately for human nature in general.

If such a thing could be, it might be said John Tremain was born without a soul; conscience he certainly was without, and anything like honor was equally foreign to his nature. His only redeeming quality was an utter absence of personal fear, and this was the result of his implicit belief in predestination. Let the odds be ever so great against him, he could not die or be slain until his time came. And when that time came, neither skill or address could change the doom that was recorded against his name at his birth.

John Tremain was consistent on this one point. He always acted in accordance with his professed faith. He took no care for or of himself. He denied himself nothing, even though to obtain it he must imbrue his hands in the blood of his nearest friend. He acted on the impulse of the moment, though it might be born of the suggestion of the foul fiend, and never stopped to consider the consequences. And thus it was that he became a mere wreck of a man; hated, feared by all into whose company he chose to pass; safe from shot or stab from behind, mainly because his firm belief in fate had also impressed those who hated him the worst. If they should make a mistake—if fate had written he should not die at their hands—they knew the result would be sure and unpitied death for them!

Such was Consumptive Johnny, as he took delight in calling himself. Not a fancy sketch, but one which will readily be recognized by more than one whose memory need not turn back for more than a single decade.

Coldly, sneeringly, the bilious little fire-eater watched Jumping Jerry as the delighted colonel drew him up to the bar and motioned his waiter to set out the decanters. Through his partially closed eyes, just then resembling those of a cat, the desperado sat in the same seat from which Jumping Jerry had sprung to snatch the disgusting dose from the hands of Cripple Josey and fling its contents into the face of his malicious tormentor, and watched the lithe, handsome Gamecock from Sundown, just then in his happy mood, laughing, talking, exaggerating with a quaint picturesqueness that robbed his words of their folly.

And Colonel Fletcher, with an ardor strange in one of his naturally reserved, sober disposition, quietly drew the Gamecock on and on, his own dark eyes glowing with amusement. It was very rare indeed that he took particular notice of a stranger; rarer yet that he made anything like a friend out of such; most rare that he so far unbent from his native dignity and hauteur as to laugh and jest in public, though those who knew him best averred the doughty old soldier was a most enjoyable companion when in private, with his pet birds.

To all seeming, Jerry, the colonel, these around them, had utterly forgotten the existence of such a personage as Consumptive Johnny, and the little desperado showed his white teeth a little as he remarked this, shrugging his shoulders and stifling a hacking cough, though the doing so brought tears of pain into his eyes.

"Take your time, my gallant cock of the walk," he murmured, leaning his head lazily on one thin hand, the other vaguely fingering the charm that dangled from his chain: a grim death's-head in gold; with a horribly suggestive white worm peering out of one eye-socket. "It is written that one or both of us are to turn toes up as worm-food this very night. Time enough—play a little longer, poor devil."

It is a wonder that Jumping Jerry did not

feel uneasy beneath that baneful gaze. But he gave no sign of remembering the fellow, and despite his stoicism, John Tremain after awhile began to feel irritated. He threw all his power of will into his gaze, trying to make Jumping Jerry turn and look toward him, but in this, too, he was foiled.

With a sudden impulse he rose and moved toward the bar, fairly brushing the Gamecock's elbow in the action, saying, softly:

"Just a drop of my particular, if you please, waiter."

It was as though some malicious hand had unexpectedly cast a shower of ice-water over them all, and for a brief space utter silence reigned. Then a few of those nearest the desperado gently edged to a safer distance, leaving Consumptive Johnny, the colonel and Jumping Jerry slightly isolated from the others.

The colonel frowned darkly, uneasily; Jumping Jerry slightly moved as though to give the new-comer more room, smiling as carelessly as though he failed to recognize him. The bar-keeper set forth a decanter and glass, then edged away, seemingly ready to "hunt his hole" in case an erect attitude became suddenly dangerous in his narrow quarters.

Cold and impassive, Consumptive Johnny filled his glass, leaning on the elbow of the hand that held the liquor to his lips, daintily sipping, while his black eyes insolently stared into the face of the Gamecock.

Jumping Jerry soon noticed this stare, and a light laugh parted his lips, as he said, coolly:

"Think you ever saw a handsomer specimen of a man, little boy?"

"I can show you the last lodgings of a dozen, the worst among them able to give you odds and a beating," was the icy retort. "But your beauty outside didn't interest me just then. I was trying to guess whether your memory was shorter than common this evening, or whether you always keep as safe a distance between your precious person and one whom you took the pains to step out of your way to insult."

"The little lad with a passion for snakes and whisky, sure enough!" laughed Jumping Jerry, in pretended surprise. "Why, bless my soul! sonny, I thought your mammy had come for her hopeful, taken him home, spanked him soundly for running 'round nights in the company of sinful men, then tucked him in his little bed—hours and hours ago!"

Where more polished taunts would have glanced harmlessly from his armor, this playful railery stung the desperado to the quick, as the sudden glowing of the hectic spots in his sunken cheeks proved to those who knew him best, though in no other way did he show signs of irritation.

"Not exactly, sir. I have been keeping guard over the door to make sure you didn't slip out to escape paying your debts."

"I am your debtor, then?"

"Say rather that I owe you a select lot in my private graveyard, and am anxious to fit you for it," bowed Consumptive Johnny.

A heavy hand was placed on his shoulder, and he turned his head to encounter the stern, warning gaze of Colonel Fletcher, who said:

"You are known as a sort of privileged character, John Tremain, in Solid City, but you must not presume too far. I have heard all that happened here to-night between you two. He only served you right for imposing on an old man, and he a cripple, with a cracked brain. If he had sent the glass after the contents, he would have been held justified by all honest men."

"The more fool he, then," laughed the other.

"He pitied your weakness, I suppose, as many another man has done, to their sorrow," was the stern addition. "Now I want you to understand one thing. This gentleman is my particular friend. Who insults him, insults me. You can't do it with safety, sah, in this establishment."

"Am I to understand that the gentleman hides behind your back? That he makes you his advocate, hoping your grim frowns will frighten off the one he passed his word to accommodate in due time?" sneered the reckless little fire-eater.

"You are to understand just what my words convey, sah; that I'll put up with no more of your dirty work, if I have to throw you out, neck and crop, sah!" sharply uttered the veteran, looking just as though he was all ready to put his words into execution, too.

"If so," coolly added the desperado, totally ignoring the threat, "I can tell him a still easier and surer way. Let him write cowardly cur on a card and hang it around his neck!"

Jumping Jerry, grave and cold-faced, touched the angry veteran on the arm as he spoke:

"My friend, will you please allow me to deal with this little scrub whiffet after his own liking? I ask it as a favor, sir."

"He is beneath the notice of any honest man," grumbled the colonel, his eyes flashing. "Only for his sneaking, insignificant face, I would have bounced him long ago as a disgrace to any decent establishment. He looks so near dead that I hadn't the conscience to touch him in rudeness—as for touching him in any other way, I'd as soon fondle a rattlesnake in August!"

Stoic though he prided himself on being, this honest scorn and contempt nettled Tremain. He smiled at the speaker, but it was a smile that almost distilled poison, and fuller of threats to get even than a torrent of angry blustering.

"Just suppose I'm a rascal, then, for a few minutes, colonel," and Jumping Jerry gently pushed the veteran to one side so he could fairly face the little fire-eater.

His tones were altogether different now, and those who looked on and listened in breathless silence felt that Consumptive Johnny was biting off considerably more than he could chew just then!

"You take on the airs of a fighting man, sir, and I'll fall in with your humor, just for once. I'm in a sort of fighting mood myself this evening, and now I've got my hand in, I'll accommodate all and any who have the grit to put on the gaffs with the Gamecock from Sundown."

"I've heard dunghill roosters try to crow before now!"

"Make the most of the last chance you'll ever get in this world, then, if you admire the music. I've given one fool his life since the sun set, and I don't want to insult all decent men beyond forgiveness. You say you want to fight; nominate your tools, and I'll meet you on the same conditions I met Albino Dave."

Consumptive Johnny shrugged his narrow shoulders, as he quietly bit the tip from a cigar and struck a match.

"You want matters all your own way, I see?"

"Explain, if you please, sir."

"With pleasure. I am no shot. I might hit one of these walls, if I were shut up tightly inside the room. My arms are too weak to handle a knife long against an ordinary grip and wrist. And as for boxing, a baby in arms is not more helpless than yours truly."

"Which means your sand is failing you? If you don't mean fight, why are you crowing in that strain?" impatiently retorted Jerry.

"There's more ways than one to cross the range, and better tests of true, unadulterated grit than facing death at pistol muzzle or knife-point. I believe, under all your bluster and clashing ways, a coward lies in hiding. I want to kill you—just why, doesn't matter at present—but even more than that, I wish to make you show the white feather that will prove you a cur at bottom. Is that sufficiently plain?"

"Clear as mud," laughed the sport from Sundown, returning to his wonted careless, reckless demeanor. "I believe you want to kill me, even though you do say it; and if you don't ask too long odds, I'll meet you at your own game. Anything to clear the atmosphere?"

"Then, will you oblige me?" bowed Consumptive Johnny, as he led the way to the little round table already noticed, placing a chair for his adversary with an exaggerated politeness, waiting until Jumping Jerry accepted it before seating himself.

Troubled, dark-faced, sorely-tempted to interfere again, despite the wishes of his new-made friend, Colonel Fletcher watched them. Less anxious, perhaps, but not a whit less interested in the affair, the sports of Solid City gathered around in silent waiting.

Consumptive Johnny did not appear to be in any particular haste to open his budget, leaning with one elbow on the table watching Jumping Jerry through the curls of blue smoke, his eyes half closed, the hectic spots showing clearly on his sunken cheeks.

"All trimmed and heeled, ready for the fly when your laziness pleases to say the word, little scrub," uttered the Gamecock, returning that insolent gaze with interest.

"Beg pardon, sir," with a little start. "I was just reflecting in which snug corner of my private lot that elegant figure of yours would fit the nicest," smiled the fire-eater.

"I'm not hard to suit; almost any out of the way corner will fit me well enough," was the equally cool retort.

"Then, colonel, will you be so kind as to accommodate us with an unopened pack of cards? If so, we'll get down to sober business."

A little stir agitated the crowd. They knew Consumptive Johnny had never yet met his match at short cards in Solid City.

CHAPTER XIV.

CONSUMPTIVE JOHNNY TRIES HIS LUCK.

"I'll see you in the middle of Tophet first!" growled the colonel, with undisguised hatred for the bilious little fire-eater in both face and voice. "Don't come to me, sah, for help in carrying out your infernally dirty tricks, or I'll forget my self-respect and stain my hands by pitching you out of doors, neck and heels, sah!"

Consumptive Johnny showed his teeth in a disagreeably cold smile.

"Two souls with but a single thought! How unfortunate it is that fate has written I must part them! Patience, colonel; I'll send you to join your latest pet with the least possible delay, when I have seen him fairly planted."

There was actually no limit to the audacity of the little villain. And with all his coolness, he seemed to mean every word he uttered.

The odds seemed altogether against him. He was heaping his insults on first one man and then the other, either one of whom could, appar-

ently, lift him up with a single hand and hold him suspended until he choked to death, without at all discommoding themselves.

Jumping Jerry saw that the veteran was rapidly nearing the point where forbearance ceased to be a virtue, and with that bright, winning smile of his he put out one hand and gently tapped his impetuous friend on an arm, saying:

"You won't refuse my custom, I'm sure, colonel?"

"In nothing but—"

"Thanks, double over, though I felt confident you'd never go back on an old pard in time of need, which is right now. Johnny-behind-the-bar, just sling a sealed deck of cards this way, will you?"

Thus blocked before he could make a move, Colonel Fletcher turned and selected the cards himself, returning with them covered by his broad palm. Consumptive Johnny bowed, with a smile, his voice sweet as melted sugar as he spoke again:

"Just so the tools are provided, it matters little to me how or by whom. My sole reason for asking a particular friend of yours, sir, to furnish them, was to prove how completely I was trusting all to fate."

"And unless she lies in her signature on your face, you do well in selecting cards as the lottery," laughed Jumping Jerry. "If you had mentioned a bit of neat, pliable rope, now, I'd feel justified in offering the sports long odds on the outcome!"

"You are not weakening already?"

"Not a bit of it, though it's rather trying to a sensitive pair of nostrils. If you could conveniently hurry up your hoe-cakes a little, I'll take care the courtesy is not forgotten in your epitaph."

"So kind!" cooed Johnny, with a sickly smile. "Beg your friends to make a note of it, for you'll hardly live to give orders to that effect."

"So Albino Dave was open to bet, when he stood in the same position you now occupy," was the cool retort. "But I'm alive and crowing, while he—again like you—lives only through my mercy."

"Because, like many another conceited ass, he trusted wholly to his own skill, which failed him just when he needed it most. Now I am a cat of an altogether different breed—"

"The first syllable of which can best be represented by a long stick," laughed the Gamecock from Sundown, but the little desperado resumed without seeming to notice the insinuation:

"And one of us two will never leave this room alive."

"You thought death was certain to remove either Albino or yours truly, too, but you slipped up on it. Mind you, I don't promise to spare you as I did him; there was some little decency about Davey. But this I do say: I'll agree beforehand to all and any terms you may make, provided you give me anything like a fair shake with yourself: I'll meet you at your own game, provided you swear to meet me afterward at a little game of my own invention, time and place to be settled by me."

"Anywhere save beyond the grave," smiled Tremain.

Jumping Jerry lifted his brows in mock surprise.

"How did you happen to guess my aversion to an overly hot climate? Really, I did not look for so much polite consideration on your part, but—is it a bargain?"

"Why not?" with a soft laugh. "If I am to kill you, you will not repeat the demand. If my time has come, even your supply of cheek will hardly be great enough to blame me for not answering."

Jumping Jerry turned abruptly away, casting a swift, comprehensive glance around the interested faces as he spoke:

"I call on you, gentlemen, to bear witness to our little agreement. I am to meet Mr. Tremain at his own game. If we both live to pass through that ordeal, he binds himself to meet me again, letting me name time, place, and tools, only stipulating, as I do with him, for fair play and an equal chance for his life."

"We hear it, and will remember, sah," stiffly uttered the colonel. "But you are doing the snarling whiffet too much honnah, sah! He should be pecked to death by turkey-buzzards, sah!"

"You hold a terrible grudge against the poor birds, then?" laughed the Gamecock. "But this is not business, and I'm at your service, Mr. Tremain. My bolt is shot, and it is your turn to toot now."

"May you thoroughly enjoy the music, sir," bowed the icy sport, so cold to outward seeming, but with his black eyes glowing like balls of living fire.

He cast away his partially consumed cigar, straightening up from that idly lounging attitude, his voice clear and incisive, all traces of languor vanishing like magic.

"The moment I first set eyes on your face, Jeremiah Titus, I knew that death lay between you and me. To which that death would come, I knew then no more surely than I know now; but come it must to one or to both, and that right speedily."

"Feeling thus, I let matters shape themselves,

knowing that we would come into collision when and where fate had ordained, no matter how much I might try to avoid or to precipitate the encounter. It was fate that made me torment Cripple Josey, and fate that led you to take his part. It was this same blind trust in fate that led me to give way to the claim of Albino Dave, knowing right well that he could not harm you unless he was foreordained to do so."

"That does sound better than crawling through fear from the muzzle of a derringier, don't it?" murmured Jumping Jerry, softly.

Consumptive Johnny smiled quietly.

"The gentlemen around you could possibly convince your doubts as to my sand, Jeremiah, if they had time. And, possibly, you may have time to judge for yourself, if your brain is nimble and sticks to business. But let that flea stick by the wall."

"As I said, I knew at the first glimpse that fate ordained one of us should kill the other, and in acting as I have ever since, I have been influenced by no feeling of dislike or hatred for you. I simply yielded to the inevitable. If it was written that my hand should shed your blood, I could not keep it clean. If, on the contrary, you were to put out my little light, nothing I or you could do would save it from utter extinction."

"A most consoling reflection, truly!" exclaimed the Gamecock from Sundown; but despite himself he was deeply impressed by the cold fatalism of this bilious little rascal.

"I am glad you think so," was the grave retort. "I know it is such to me, but possibly I may be an exception to the general rule."

"Of common decency, sah!" snorted the disgruntled veteran.

Tremain looked into his angry face with a peculiar smile.

"One at a time, and they'll last longer, colonel. If I am to come out on top of the deck, this turn, I'll give you all the chance to get even for your new pet, that you can ask. Until then—will you try to keep that unruly tongue in order?"

If ever mortal man came near exploding through pure indignation, the old soldier ran that risk then! He turned fairly purple in the face, and had not Jumping Jerry gently tread on his toes, he might have taken unceremonious control of the affair, right then and there.

"After me, colonel, if you please," muttered the Gamecock, with a warning gleam in his big blue eyes. "When I draw out of the game, it is time enough for another to fill my place. Don't let's you and I quarrel over such small stakes, please."

The colonel bowed slightly, turning his back to the table. It was hard work to keep within bounds, but he managed to do so, though his short, quick breathing told how difficult he found it.

"Just a few more words by way of explanation, dear sir, and then we will get down to simple business," smoothly added Consumptive Johnny, with that tantalizing, sneering smile habitual with him when in his most evil moods.

"Though you have created such a sensation in Solid City since you first put in an appearance this afternoon; though you have ruffled it so bravely, and crowed in triumph over two good men; I still doubt your having what I call pure grit. If I am wrong, time will prove my error, and before I kill you I will make public confession of my mistake. If I am right—well, at least you will not have time to do much blushing for yourself, and after one's little light is snuffed out, what matter the opinions of our fellows?"

"You tell!" grunted Jumping Jerry, leaning his head on his palm with an elbow supported on the table, adding with a portentous yawn: "Some o' you wake me up when his tongue runs down, will you? He makes me so tired!"

A low laugh ran around the circle of sports, showing how wholly their sympathies had drifted away from the little predestinarian: but Consumptive Johnny only showed his teeth a trifle as he added:

"It's hardly worth while to take a short nap now, when a long and sound sleep is so near at hand, Mr. Titus. Still, if you are so impatient to test the mysteries which lay over the range, so be it!"

"Colonel Fletcher, will you see whether those cards are properly sealed? You can testify that they have not been opened?"

"They came from my private stock, sah, and I am no blackleg," was the surly response.

"No person has accused you, to my knowledge, colonel. If I had not perfect faith in your honesty and fairness, be sure I'd not select you as the minister of fate in this case."

"I'll have no hand in it, sah! I wash my hands of the whole case, sah!" and the veteran lifted the sealed deck as though to cast it into that pale, smiling face.

"Then you go back on the man you call your friend?"

It was a center shot, and the colonel paused. He glanced keenly from the face of one to the face of the other. Tremain was cold and indifferent. Titus held his doubting gaze for a brief space, his blue orbs full of magnetic light. And then, reluctantly yielding, Fletcher muttered:

"What part in this infernal affair have you assigned me, sah?"

"That of deciding which one of us two is to make way for the other, colonel. Of course, fate has the main say-so, but you are to be her hand-maid, so to speak."

"Which being interpreted, means?" queried Jumping Jerry.

"What I would have explained long since, but for your silly attempt at a worn-out joke," bowed Tremain, with a malicious smile curling his thin lips.

"May these kind gentry forgive me for prolonging their misery on such a close night, then?" laughed the Gamecock. "I'm mum. Proceed."

"I mean to prove you either a rank coward or a man of pure sand, unless I have made a mistake in interpreting the finger of fate. If I have, and you are to look on instead, then I'll have the pleasure of convincing you that it does not take brawn and muscle to make a man."

"If you were only fitted up with cogwheels, so you could keep the track for ten seconds at a stretch!" groaned the Gamecock.

"In doing this, I mean to leave nothing to chance," equably continued the little desperado, paying no attention to the interruption. "We will surrender all the weapons we have on our persons. The barkeeper can take care of them until the survivor claims his own, and those once belonging to the dead man as his little perquisite."

"How remarkably thoughtful! He forgets nothing, the little darling!" murmured Jumping Jerry, lifting his eyes in mock admiration.

"One of the gentlemen will kindly place an unloaded derringer on the table between us. He will place a single cartridge beside it, for future use. Then the colonel will break the seal of his deck, shuffle the cards well, hold them under his hand on the side of the table most convenient to him."

"And then—the devil will pop up through the floor and bear off his prize in a glare of sulphur?" mocked the Gamecock.

"Then I will name the conditions of the little game," coolly added the desperado.

Colonel Fletcher turned livid, his eyes fairly blazing, though he managed to keep from assaulting the devilishly cool rascal, who had thus, without openly appearing to do so, evened up his score for the contempt showered upon him by the honest veteran. His insolent smile told all who looked, that he would give the colonel no opportunity to "turn a trick" against him by naming the scheme more definitely until the cards were prepared for use and placed in such a position that foul play would be absolutely impossible.

Only a confirmed fatalist like this diabolical little scoundrel would have dared offer even such a veiled insinuation against a man who was known to be the soul of honor, as well as a dangerous man to insult. As it was, Consumptive Johnny came nearer meeting his deserts at that moment than he had ever had in all his life before.

Only the calming touch of the Gamecock's hand, only his warning glance, mingled with an appealing expression, served to keep the trembling hands of the insulted host from the little demon's throat.

Then, his very rage calming him outwardly, Colonel Fletcher moved a little closer to the table, holding the pack of cards where both of the duelists could see its seal was intact. He tore off the wrapper, and with the skill of a practiced hand shuffled the deck, his broad hands hiding even the back of the top card from the two men. Then, with the evened deck covered over, he stood silently waiting for Consumptive Johnny to name his game.

"Once more, dear sir, let me assure you that I hold no personal nor private grudge against you. It is fate that I must kill or be killed by you. If I am the one elected, ask my friends to plant me decently. They will find *oro* enough on my body to pay them for their trouble, and to set up a modest stone with the epitaph carved on it: '*It was so written!*'"

"If I am to kill you, I'll see you neatly put under the sod, and carry out your wishes to the extent of my humble ability. If you have any messages to leave for your friends or relatives, I'll deliver them, if you choose to elect me your messenger."

His tones so low and smooth, his smile so bland, his face so filled with admirably counterfeited solicitude, Consumptive Johnny never before showed his devilish nature quite so fully. And, nervy though he had proven himself since his arrival at Solid City, Jumping Jerry could not entirely conceal his annoyance, though his laugh was loud and his words bold enough when he made reply:

"I'll not trouble you, for, though my friends know I've fallen a little from my high estate, I'd hate to have them think I had dropped so low as to have anything to do with *you*! To you, gentlemen," with a backward glance and nod, "I will say: Plant me in as good shape as you can afford. Write on a bit of board—'Down on his luck. Killed by a dung-hill as penalty for stooping below his grade!'"

He turned again to Consumptive Johnny, his tones hard and blunt:

"Enough of folly. Get down to plain business, or I'll take you over my knee and give you what Paddy gave the drum!"

The little fire-eater rose and took his weapons from his person, handing them to the man nearest him, saying:

"Will you please give them to the barkeeper?"

He bowed to Jumping Jerry, who promptly imitated his example.

"Now, if some one will be so kind as to lend the table an empty derringer and a single cartridge, we'll be ready to test our luck."

There was no lack of derringers offered on the instant, and the sport whose tool was accepted, was immediately the object of envy on the part of the less lucky ones. So deeply were they one and all interested in this curious affair, that the slightest connection with it promised to be a matter for future boasts.

"Now, colonel, I reckon we are all set and ready for business. You will greatly oblige us if you will turn the cards, one by one, just as they lay, giving a single one to each in regular succession, back up. As it is received, the recipient will turn it over, face up. The man to whom the ace of spades falls, will sit still in his chair while the other loads the derringer and then kills him."

Though this startling proposition was uttered in the coolest, smoothest possible tone, it created a sensation among the spectators. They had expected something out of the usual routine, from what had already transpired, but this was even more sensational than their wildest fancies.

Jumping Jerry alone showed no signs of being moved. His handsome face might have been a mask of stone for any change of expression that could be traced even by the malicious eyes of the fatalist. And in the coolest, carelessst of tones, he asked:

"Which one shall have the first card, little scrub?"

"You shall be your own executioner, my dear sir," smiled Consumptive Johnny. "Take your choice, please."

"After you is manners," laughed the Gamecock.

"So be it! Colonel, will you oblige us?" softly purred Tremain.

"May Providence bring the fatal card to you, devil!" grated the colonel, savagely, as he passed the first card across to the rascal.

"You forget; Satan is my patron saint, colonel," bowed the desperado, turning his card and squaring it before him.

It was a small spot-card.

One by one Colonel Fletcher dealt off the cards, giving each man ample time to receive and turn the one before dealing another. Card after card came off, each one watched by the spectators with equal if not increasing interest, until more than one-half the pack had been divided without the fatal card making its appearance.

It was a trying period, and of all there only the two men whose lives hung trembling in the balance showed no signs of outward emotion. What their feelings below the surface, they alone could have told, and not a word escaped their lips as they coldly, quietly, unflinchingly performed their parts in the strange duel.

Then—a long, gasping breath burst from the strange lungs of the spectators—a glad, relieved cry came from the pale lips of Colonel Fletcher—for with a hand steady as the fate itself which he worshiped, Consumptive Johnny faced the fatal ace of spades!

A single vivid gleam shot into the blue eyes of the Gamecock from Sundown, but it faded away before his rival glanced quietly at him.

"It seems I made a little mistake in reading the signs, but not so much as I might. One of us was to die, I knew; it proves to be me instead of you, that is all. At your pleasure, Mr. Titus."

His tones were as smooth and as even as ever. His face was as composed, his hand as steady as that of one in the best of health and fully assured of a long and blissful future, as he took the empty derringer by the muzzle and held it toward his successful adversary. With his other hand he held the cartridge.

There was a slight pause, Jumping Jerry gazing fixedly into those black eyes, as though seeking to read there some sign of fear or pleading for mercy; but if such was his expectation, it was doomed to be disappointed. Consumptive Johnny was pure grit, as that ordeal fully proved to every one who witnessed his carriage.

"You won't beg, then?" slowly asked Jumping Jerry, taking the tools and slipping the shell into the breech of the derringer.

"Do you always insult a man before killing him?" smiled Tremain.

"I never looked upon you as a man—until this moment. It's a pity you haven't proven yourself a better one, for there's hardly time to alter your record now."

"I am waiting on your pleasure, sir," was the icy retort.

"Was it nominated in the bond that I was to

break my neck in trying to shove you over the range?" smiled the Gamecock from Sundown, a glittering light in his blue eyes, as he carelessly toyed with the derringer, testing the workings of its lock, raising and lowering the hammer, like some boy testing the merits of a new plaything.

"Not at all, my dear fellow," and Consumptive Johnny took out his embroidered case and carefully selected a cigar from its contents. "I said I was waiting your pleasure, I believe; if that is crowding you, I beg pardon."

He struck a match, holding his head daintily to one side to avoid the fumes of the burning sulphur. He lighted his cigar, leaning back in his chair, thumbs in the armholes of his vest, watching the curling wreaths of blue smoke as they ascended toward the ceiling.

Breathlessly the men around them watched, longing for the end, yet beginning to dread it as well. Never before since he struck Solid City had Consumptive Johnny come so near gaining the respect and admiration of honest men as he did in that great emergency. Such an exhibition of cool daring fascinated them.

It seemed to have just the opposite effect on Jumping Jerry. All trace of mockery vanished from his eyes and face. He quit toying with the derringer, leaning across the table, his voice hard and merciless.

"You play it well, my man, but it won't go down with an old sport. In your heart you are counting on my letting you off, just as I let off Moses Redheffer and Albino Dave. You think that I will be just as soft a fool in your case as I proved myself in theirs; but why should I repeat my folly?"

"In both of those cases I had some little excuse. They were both of them men, not bloodless devils! They were human—you are worse than I ever believed anything in the mockery of human shape could ever become. You are not fit to die, but you are less fit to live!"

"Still, I should not have gone out of my way to crush your head with my heel, and had you kept your distance, or had you even crowded me just as hard, but with at least an outward semblance of decency, I might have shown myself still a soft-hearted idiot, and having won the right to do so by risking my life against yours, read you a lesson in common humanity by turning you free to mend your evil ways!"

"Instead, you torture before killing," smiled Tremain, insolently. "Couldn't you write down your moral lecture, ram it on top of the ball, and deliver both at the same time? It would make a much deeper impression, I assure you."

Jumping Jerry was wasting precious time, if he only realized it. The fickle crowd was already changing. A man who was cool and quick-witted enough to perpetrate such a ghastly joke as that in the very face of death, was too gritty to be slaughtered, more than one of the assembled sports caught himself thinking.

"It is my turn now, Johnny," was the cool retort. "You bored our ears before playing to bore my skull. I'm only getting even before I put on the finishing touch."

"You counted on playing both ends against the middle. You flattered yourself on gaining big reputation for grit, even if you lost, for you counted on my letting you down easy, as I did the others. Right there you fooled yourself, for—Step to one side, gentlemen, for I'm open to bet odds his head is not sound enough to stop a bullet of this caliber!" he cried sternly, his face hard set, his eyes glowing, as he leaned forward with leveled derringer.

An instant scattering—a loud report—and throwing up his hands, Consumptive Johnny fell backward to the floor without a cry!

CHAPTER XV.

THROUGH THREE PAIR OF EYES.

ONCE more Jumping Jerry was given reason to feel how lightly the current of popular feeling veers from one point to its direct opposite, and what a precious slight margin there is between being hailed as a hero and execrated as a monster by the fickle public.

Through all that war of words, through all the drawing until after Consumptive Johnny turned over the fatal card on whose falling depended a human life, the sympathy of nearly every man there present had been with the gallant Gamecock from Sundown. Hardly a man present but caught himself hoping the ace of spades would fall to the lot of the bilious little fire-eater. Hardly a man whose heart beat high with eager hope as often as Jumping Jerry turned up a fortunate card, only to sink again as they beheld this duplicated by John Tremain. And when the death-lot at last came to the share of the fatalist, few were there who did not feel the temptation to send their hats to the ceiling and relieve their lungs by one wild yell of grim delight.

Five minutes later—they were watching the Gamecock with dark and gloomy brows. Their fickle hearts were feeling it a shame that one who had such magnificent "sand" should have to die the death of a dog without even the ghost of a show for his life.

Only in looks, until Jumping Jerry uttered that sharp warning—until he thrust forward

the derringer and pulled the trigger—until Consumptive Johnny, without sound or groan, flung up his hands and tumbled a dead weight over backward with his chair lying silent and motionless on the sanded floor.

Then—low, sullen mutterings broke the painful-silence. Dark looks were turned upon the victor as he rose to his feet, dropping his empty weapon upon the table. Those who had so recently been foremost in courting his notice, now instinctively drew back from his vicinity like men who fear contagion.

Not a word, not a threat was uttered, but the Gamecock from Sundown found no difficulty in interpreting their sentiments as he cast a swift, comprehensive glance around upon those forbidding faces. Only Colonel Fletcher stood faithful, drawing nearer the handsome sport with a hand on his revolver, his black eyes glowing with honest indignation.

For a single breath Jumping Jerry stood as though defying their united forces, then a clear, mocking laugh parted his lips as he cried:

"Spare your tears, gentlemen, until there is better occasion for them, for your pet is none the worse for my dose, unless he has let his own craven fears kill him!"

They stared aghast, puzzled, at loss what to think.

"The little runt is not only a false prophet, but an impostor after still another fashion. His boasted sand was nothing grittier than poor soapstone dust. He held up, clinging to his belief that I would spare him, even as I touched lightly on Albino Dave, but when he saw I looked like business—down went his meat-house, though my bullet only marked him as a careless farmer might mark his poorest pigs—with an under-bit out of his right ear!"

Even yet they could hardly believe the words they heard, staring from the speaker to that limp, nerveless shape which lay so like a dead man, and then back again as though in search of further light.

Jumping Jerry laughed, his tones growing harder and more metallic.

"Look to the little scoundrel, ye who were ready to shed bitter tears when you thought he had at length met the fate his life has so richly deserved, ten thousand times over! Look to him, and satisfy yourselves that I am not the vile assassin you thought. Look to him. Care for him. Nurse him back to life—and then watch that he doesn't sink his poison fangs deep into your veins by way of expressing his gratitude!"

He turned away from them, a genial smile lighting up his strong features as he gently placed one arm over the broad shoulders of the veteran fancier, moving toward the bar, his voice low, his accent far less clear and steady than when he faced peril.

"I thank you, friend, for standing by me as you have. Some day I hope to do more than thank you in empty words. Until then—shake!"

Their palms crossed, their eyes looked squarely into each other, and from that moment the twain were true and steadfast friends until death should come to step between.

This little incident passed unnoticed by the others in the room. No longer under that burning glance of scorn, some of the sports bent over the fallen desperado, the rest crowding around them, all eager to solve the mystery.

There was a little blood marking the face of Consumptive Johnny, but it came only from the mutilated lobe of his right ear. Jumping Jerry had spoken the simple truth. His lead could have given but a smart sting. The nerve of the fatalist had suddenly failed him, precisely as it has others better and braver than he under strong trial.

"I'm glad, and yet sorry, friend," said the colonel in a grave, troubled tone as he stood beside the bar, watching Jumping Jerry stow away his weapons. "Glad that your hands are not stained with the life of such a venomous scoundrel; sorry that he has not killed himself with pure fright. But maybe he has!" he ejaculated with a sudden lighting up of his stern countenance.

Jumping Jerry shook his head quietly.

"I think not. I saw that his nerve was weakening as he began to believe I meant to exact my pound of flesh to the very letter of his own programme. That made me press him a little rougher than I intended to at first, but he hasn't got heart enough about his carcass to die of pure fright. He'll come 'round before long."

"Then, by gosh! I wish you had scattered his brains all over the place!" impulsively cried the old soldier. "He'll knife you in the back, or shoot you down from cover, the first chance he gets! He is worse than a rattlesnake—no warning from him!"

He cleared his throat and spat with disgust, motioning the barkeeper to hand out something to wash away the bad taste in his mouth.

"He corrupts the very atmosphere, so that one can taste it!" he growled, with a vicious glance over his shoulder, to the spot where Consumptive Johnny still lay without sense or motion. "Fill your glass, and join me in hoping the foul fiend will right speedily get his deserts, in the shape of—"

No name was mentioned, for none was necessary. Jumping Jerry made no objections to honoring the emphatic toast, but when he replaced his empty glass on the bar, he faced toward the men who were just then lifting the bilious little desperado from the floor.

"I'm Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown! I'm a man of business, and I never let the oro grow blue-mouldy in my weasel-skin for want of exercise when anything like an even bet will find takers. Now, you who just love that little imp of perdition, I'm open to lay two to one in thousands that he jumps the camp without stopping to ask the nature of the little game I proposed. Ten to one, in four figures, that he hasn't the sand to play the hand I've got set up for him. And free liquor for the first one among those who serve him now, to whom he utters a single word of thanks for all that is being done for him."

There was no word of acceptance or reply to this bold challenge. Already the sickle tide was turning, when it became known Consumptive Johnny had not been slain outright. Perhaps he had not shown so much grit, after all. Possibly he was stunned by terror. Perhaps—

Jumping Jerry turned toward the colonel and once more grasped his hand, saying lightly:

"I did intend to give your tiger a benefit to-night, friend, but I reckon I'll postpone that part of the programme. I've been lucky this evening, and it's a poor player that presses his luck until it turns him all upside down!"

"But you needn't play, Jerry. I'd a little rather you wouldn't, to tell the simple fact," and the colonel lowered his tones until none save the man addressed could hear him. "I'm not hungry for more money, and if you lost it would make me far more uncomfortable than it would you. Stay with me—or if you don't like the crowd, come and we'll have a look at my pet—"

He left the sentence incomplete, suddenly remembering the loss his new friend had so recently suffered. He flushed and looked embarrassed. Jumping Jerry paid no attention to the little slip, but persisted in taking his leave.

In a rude little cabin near the outskirts of Solid City, Moses Redbeffer lay on a low bunk, partially supported by his elbow, forgetting his painful injuries for the moment in his intense interest as he listened to the words of the man seated before him.

A single candle lighted up the little room, but it gave sufficient light to enable each to see the features of the other, and to readily interpret the emotions imprinted thereon.

It was now late at night, and Bennett, to whom the care of the terribly battered-up giant from Last Chance had been intrusted, had come back to his cabin from The Pit for the rest of the night. He found Red Mose eager to learn anything he could tell about his enemy, and Bennett showed little reluctance in gratifying his curiosity.

He told a tolerably straight story, though one who could have contrasted his face with that which he had showed Jumping Jerry on the Gamecock's return from planting Dandy, would have fancied the dark gambler something of a hypocrite. Certainly he did not appear to be over-head-and-ears in love with the Occidental sport just now!

"A woman hollered out that, did she?" mumbled the battered giant. "Called him Perdue Flickinger? Said he was her husband?"

"And he started as though somebody had shot him, too!" added the gambler. "One of two things: Jumping Jerry recognized his own name, or he recognized the voice of the woman that called out. It came near proving his death-warrant, too! Albino Dave grazed his temple close enough to stagger the fellow, and leave a sting behind it, I reckon."

"You see the woman critter?"

"No; I happened to be on the wrong side of the line for that."

"It don't matter much. I know her. I kin find her, ef I hev to."

Red Mose was talking more to himself than to his companion. Bennett watched him closely for the few minutes of silence that followed, then briefly gave him an account of the affair with Consumptive Johnny.

"He's gritty, darn him!" mumbled Red Mose, reluctantly, but with a certain degree of rough honesty. "Pity he ain't white, as well."

"You hold a powerful grudge against him, I reckon?"

"Ef he's raally Perdue Flickinger, big grudge enough that nothin' less than his life 'll satisfy it. Ef he ain't—ef he's on'y a sport that licked me fer crowdin' on him—no grudge at all."

"You admit yourself licked, then?" half sneeringly.

"Don't my mug look kin'er that-a-way?" and the giant rough grinned horribly. "Don't it look like a herd o' mules hed bin stampedin' all over it, an' every durned hoof in the hull durned outfit rough-sharped? That's nigh enough licked fer me, anyway!"

"And you're going back to Last Chance without trying to get even?"

Something in the tones of his companion as he uttered those words, made Red Mose lift himself higher and stare fixedly at his pale face.

What he saw written there did not appear to give him any too much pleasure, for he frowned a bit as his head fell back, and his voice had a shade of doggedness in it as he made reply:

"Fu'st, I'm goin' to make good the word I passed the sport that totes a herd o' mules up each sleeve. I'll meet him at his own game, ef it takes a wheel. Then, ef thar's anything left into my clothes, I'll—see 'bout it!"

He turned over with his face to the wall, and Bennett sat there in silence watching him, his own face dark and frowning.

In a small but snugly furnished room over the back part of The Pit, Albino Dave was also reclining on a bed, also thinking of the Gamecock of Sundown.

At a little table near the bed sat the doctor, who had just completed his work as surgeon, and was lingering for a little confidential chat with his pink-eyed patient.

"Of course, it's bad enough," he was saying, "but really I'm surprised to find it no worse. The surest shot in all the world might try the thing over and over again under the bright light of a noonday sun, and I'd bet any odds against your coming off as fortunately."

Albino Dave gave a surly growl, showing his white teeth.

"Of course, it's part of your business to make the best of it. But the result will be the same; my dealing days are over, even if I don't lose both hands!"

"Follow my directions, Davey, and I'll insure both hands and all of your fingers, for ten per cent. of your wages," laughed the doctor.

The white face lightened up, the pink eyes glittered with renewed hope, the strong voice trembled with eagerness as it uttered:

"For how long?"

"A few weeks—say a month, at the inside. Keep cool and quiet. Let the bottle alone. Don't fret too much, and you'll be warming the seat on the profitable side of the faro-table below within a month," was the cheery response.

"After—you heard what that cool demon said before he would accept my challenge?"

"You must forget that, Dave, once for all," was the sharp reply. "I did hear him, but if it wasn't all wind, then be sure he's too much of a white man to think of crowding a cripple. He'll never bring that up again, or if he does it will be when you are better able to take care of yourself than you are now."

"It may be so," muttered the wounded man, with a dark frown as he held his bandaged hands up before his face, slowly turning them over as though his glowing gaze could penetrate the white folds and sum up the full extent of his injuries. "If it is, I'll wait as patiently as may be. If not—if he does crowd it—be sure I'll be there to give him the best I know how. May the devil scorch him black!"

"Not with my consent, Dave," was the firm response. "If you act so like an infernal fool, you mustn't come to me for cure."

"All the same, I'll meet him when, where, how he says," was the dogged reply, as the wounded gambler sunk back on his pillow, his face hard set and resolute. "He'll never have the chance to say that Albino Dave held up a crippled hand to save his head."

"Pretty work you'd make handling pistol or knife without any hands, wouldn't you?" spluttered the indignant doctor.

"He won't name either knife or gun. You heard what he said about my hands, down there! Just what he's after, I can't even guess; but he means business. Mayhap he'll slip up on it, though!"

"You think, then?"

"That he's playing his cards to be acknowledged chief of Solid City," was the quiet response. "When he puts on the eagle-feathers, I'll be in a hotter clime than this—that's all!"

"Consumptive Johnny has to take his turn, first. He's little old pizen! Who knows! There may be a chance for you to witness a funeral in the morning, with a Gamecock for head character!"

"Let Johnny mind his eye," was the grim retort. "If you see him down below give him my warmest compliments, and add that if he thinks to take the plum out of my mouth, he'll get worse than sore fingers!"

The doctor soon withdrew, leaving the pale gambler alone with only his thoughts to keep him company.

Consumptive Johnny glanced up with a vicious glitter filling his black eyes by the dim light of the lamp that, turned low, stood on a little stand near the opening door. His thin hand gripped a revolver, and the pointed hammer was slowly rising, the muzzle covering the head that was thrust in at the narrow opening. But the hammer lowered without an explosion, the weapon itself was dropped on the bed beside him, and his voice grated forth:

"Come in, if you must see me. You hold your life mighty cheap, or you'd take the precaution to knock, or at least give the old sign before opening my door!"

Shutting the door behind him, the man guarded against another intrusion by turning the key in the lock. As he turned toward the other, the

dim light showed only a black mask where his face should have been.

"You've got grit enough left, then, to show your teeth?" he uttered, slowly, with a sneer that he took little pains to disguise. "The sports at The Pit lie when they say your nerve went back on you for good and all."

The hectic spots glowed brighter, but that was the only sign of anger betrayed by the little desperado. His voice was soft and even as he responded:

"Those who say that, lie. And I'm not expecting even you, chief."

His masked visitor shrugged his shoulders as he dropped into the one chair the small bedroom at the Palace afforded.

"One quarrel at a time, Johnny, if you please. The Gamecock is still living, and crows more triumphantly than ever, since he knocked you over with the bare wind of his bullet—since he broke you all up at your own pet game!"

"Let him crow. My record is enough to show fear of death had nothing to do with my falling. Not even my bitterest enemy dare hint such a thing to my face. I own that it has that appearance, though."

"And how can you explain it otherwise?"

"I admit that I was strongly excited. I never before tackled a man whose nerves I couldn't shake, let alone break down, by simple talk and looks. I underestimated him, and the strain proved more than my heart could stand, weakened as it is by disease."

"Let it go at that, then," a little impatiently cried the man in the mask. "The unpleasant, dangerous fact that this enemy still lives, stares us in the face. You were elected to kill him. You accepted that duty, and the family placed implicit confidence in your performing the job as it should be carried out. Instead—you see?"

Consumptive Johnny smiled coldly, but his black eyes were all aglow with strong emotions as he spoke again:

"I do not need you to remind me of that vow, chief. I did the best I knew how, as you said the killing must seem a purely personal affair. You were even willing that I should take my own course. I risked my life against his. I believed I could win. If I had, I would have blown his brains to the four winds. If I lost, I fully expected to pay the same price. Even the family could hardly ask more of me than this."

"I don't say it could," was the more placable response. "But you are both living. Are you going to try again? Or—but you hint that your memory is good, so I need not remind you of the penalty."

"I have it in mind, thank you, chief. It has no particular terrors for me, for I know that I can't die until my time comes, as written down at my birth in the book of fate."

"Do you refuse to carry out the part assigned you by lot?" was the low, stern demand, the dark eyes glowing vividly through the twin apertures in the black mask.

"Postponing is not refusing," was the quiet reply.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Simply that I am in a measure bound in chains, which I could not, if I would, break outright. Before I could bring the Gamecock to the point, he made me pledge my word to meet him in a little game of his own choosing, when and where he might elect. That was a condition to his waiving his right to name the tools for our first meeting. I felt sure he was my meat, and I gave the promise without hesitating."

"You'll have to break it, then," was the blunt interjection.

"Not if he asks me to make it good," was the quick, firm response.

"Then you will dare the oath that binds us all to swift and sure punishment on all who prove recreant to their vows?"

"If you care to press the matter, I surely will. After what happened this evening at The Pit, were I to fail him when he called on me to make my word good, then I would deserve the name of coward."

"This is your final decision? Think well before speaking!"

"That is my decision," was the cold reply.

"After I have given him the satisfaction he asks, I'll keep my vow to kill him. If this does not content the family, let them get down to solid business!"

Without a word in response, the masked chief turned, and unlocking the door, left the room. With a cold smile, Consumptive Johnny lay back on the bed, reflecting over the strange events of that evening.

CHAPTER XVI.

WAYLaid BY A WOMAN.

JUMPING JERRY lingered not by the wayside, but on leaving The Pit he made his way direct to the Palace Hotel, where he had a room engaged.

He paused for a moment at the entrance, looking into the fairly lighted office and barroom combined, where George Shanklin, fat and jolly, was listening with widely distended eyes and pricked-up ears to a couple of his guests, who were seeing which one could tell him the greatest part of the strange events which had marked that evening.

Jumping Jerry frowned darkly, and an expression of disgust came into his face as he noted this fact. He did not seem nearly so proud of his exploits now as he had when facing the assembled sports at the saloon under charge of the old cockfighter. On the contrary, he showed a degree of modesty that would have surprised those who had only seen him in his guise of personal trumpeter.

Instead of entering the office, as he had at first intended, Jumping Jerry stole silently in at the narrow side entrance, passing directly up-stairs, groping his way as best he might without the aid of artificial light.

He contrived to gain the door of his own room without creating any alarm, and inserting the key which he took from his pocket, opened the door and stepped inside the small room. Only to pause on the instant, with one of those curious warnings which are so difficult to explain, yet are so distinct, so sure and unerring.

Though all within the room—which was one situated near the middle of the building, without communicating with the outer world—was shrouded in darkness intense enough almost to be felt, and not a sound save that attending his movement could be heard, the Gamecock felt that the room was already occupied.

With a swift movement his hand dropped to a pistol-butt, ready to draw and fire on the instant. His only other movement was to bend his head slightly, the better to employ his keen hearing. And thus he sought to locate the intruder, after which—

"Perdue Flickinger, is that you?"

Soft and low, slightly tremulous, but still with a certain degree of boldness in its tones, the voice was unmistakably that of a woman!

To say that the Gamecock from Sundown was both startled and surprised, is putting the case very moderately. An emphatic ejaculation escaped his lips before his sense of politeness could interfere; and with a quick step backward he touched the door. The knob rattled a trifle, and the hidden voice added, with almost a laugh:

"Running away, Perdue? And without one word for your precious pet who has spent so much time and money seeking for her lost—shall we say goat?"

"Never a run, ma'am," was the prompt reply as there came the sound of a key turning in the lock. "Just fastening the door and plugging up the keyhole so you can't melt away before a poor devil can see how it looks to have a wife. Lord! luck does come in chunks, sometimes!"

Striking a match, Jumping Jerry lit the oil lamp that stood on a diminutive shelf nailed against the wall, then turned to catch a glimpse of his strange visitor. He did—and of more!

Mrs. Perdue Flickinger sat on the edge of his narrow, low bed, placidly returning his regards. Placidly as to outward seeming, but with a brilliant glitter in her big blue eyes and a firm compression of her red lips that, added to one other symptom, showed she meant business.

One dainty hand held a cocked revolver, the muzzle bearing full upon the Gamecock, and held with so steady a nerve that the precaution taken by the lady, of supporting her elbow with her left hand, seemed entirely superfluous.

"Don't attempt anything hasty, my excellent husband, or you may possibly get hurt," she said, showing her white teeth in a smile that was more threatening than a frown.

Jumping Jerry made no impulsive movement. He stood still, his blue eyes slowly roving over the face and figure of his midnight visitor, as though loth to lose a single detail. Then, in a low, indistinct tone, like one speaking to himself, he uttered:

"Trim-built and well-feathered. Of good stock, but not wholly pure—an out-cross somewhere not far back in the pedigree. A veteran, or I miss my guess. A little stale, too, from over training, or else—"

A hard, sneering laugh cut him short, and like one rousing from a deep reverie, Jumping Jerry listened:

"Bah! you cunning scoundrel! Do you think to deceive me by your babble? Think I am so blind as to fail to recognize my husband?"

"Only a fool or a common liar would accuse such bright eyes of fault or weakness," bowed Jumping Jerry.

"I only wonder at my having held my hand so long," the woman uttered, in a hard, strained voice, still keeping the revolver at a level. "I came here to kill you. I have sworn to grant you no further grace. When I recall all that you have made me suffer, Perdue Flickinger—"

Jumping Jerry gave a start, and there was a trace of deep dejection in his tones as he ejaculated:

"I knew it! Such luck don't come to ordinary critters like me! I find a wife, only to discover she don't belong to me, after all, but to some other villain, and all this before I have time to give her a single buss for old times' sake: 'Twas ever thus, in—"

"That will do, Perdue Flickinger," was the sharp interruption. "I didn't come here to waste time in listening to nonsense. I haven't traveled thousands of weary miles to be thrown from the course I've marked out by a few words of idle buffoonery. I'm not the soft, weak fool you knew in the days gone by, but a woman

driven to the verge of desperation—a woman who even now is terribly tempted to pull this trigger and send a bullet crashing through your scheming brain!"

Jumping Jerry was in a perilous position, and right well he knew that fact. He could trace something close akin to madness in those luridly glowing orbs, in that hard tone and pale, rigid face. But he also knew that any sudden act or movement on his part would surely precipitate the catastrophe, and without altering his position, he said, in calm, even tones:

"I don't like to spoil a lady's fun, and if you are bent on shooting, and if any other man will fill the bill as target quite as well as the Perdue Flickinger you mention, blaze away. A little mistake like that hadn't ought to count!"

"Bah! you are Perdue Flickinger!"

"If you insist, of course," was the easy reply. "But the light is hardly bright enough for favorable sighting. Permit me."

Without showing in tone, face or manner, the expectation he really felt of receiving a shot as he made the motion, Jumping Jerry partly turned and running the lamp wick higher with one hand, grasped it with the other, facing around and casting the full glow into his own face.

"If you are still certain that I am the Perdue Flickinger you seek, madam, empty that little toy of yours as soon as you like!"

The woman gazed keenly at the pale, handsome face thus fully revealed, at first with stern resolve and even savage hatred, but then with a growing expression of puzzled doubt and wonder. Not a muscle did Jumping Jerry move, until that threatening weapon began to shake and grow unsteady. He smiled brightly, his blue eyes beginning to twinkle, and then the pistol sunk into the lap of Mrs. Flickinger, while she herself shrunk back, a wild, frightened light coming into her face and eyes.

Jumping Jerry knew that there was no longer any danger of her shooting him, and turning, he replaced the lamp on its shelf, fumbling with the wick after a fashion that kept him occupied until the woman had time to partially regain her composure and collect her scattered senses.

His face grave and dignified, his manner quiet and gentlemanly, his voice kind and earnest, Jumping Jerry seated himself on the one chair which the little chamber afforded, saying:

"Now, my dear madam, I am wholly at your service. If there is anything I can do to serve you, pray do not hesitate a moment in trusting me. Or, if you wish to go your way, I promise you I will banish from mind and memory all that has occurred or been said in here, the very instant you cross the threshold of this room."

There was a brief silence after this. Mrs. Flickinger was closely examining the handsome face that had so utterly deceived her, gradually realizing the truth. This was not Perdue Flickinger. This was not the fugitive from justice over whose head hung the gallows. Not him, though the resemblance to the Perdue Flickinger of the past was wonderfully strong.

And then, with the instinct of a confirmed coquette, who can no more refrain from testing the power of beauty and feminine fascination on whichever of the opposite sex fortune may bring them in contact with, than a dandy can keep from putting on airs when conscious that he has come beneath the light of fair eyes, she was suddenly transformed into the same deliciously helpless, meek, saintlike being whose marvelous charms had so utterly subjected fat George Shanklin.

The Gamecock from Sundown was not nearly such a novice in woman's wiles and arts as honest George, but as he saw that lightning change, as he noted its completeness, as he saw the hard lines and even wrinkles fill out and leave only the smooth roundness of youth; as he saw before him a gentle, helpless, lovely girl, instead of the woman of almost middle age, hard and world-worn; he could hardly choke back the ejaculation of surprise that rose in his throat.

"I am so ashamed—so mortified!" murmured that lovely creature, as her smooth cheeks grew rosy, her blue eyes glancing shyly into his handsome face, then drooping with delicious modesty, her white hands deftly bidding the tell-tale pistol with a fold of her dress. "What must you think of my conduct? And yet—if you knew all, you would think twice before condemning me utterly! I have suffered so much!"

Jumping Jerry took his cue with a readiness that spoke well for his success as an actor, should necessity ever call him on the stage.

"If I did not fear to offend by being deemed intrusive, lady, I would offer you my heartfelt sympathy. As it is, I can only offer you my humble services, if they can in any way lighten your distress."

"Then you do not utterly condemn me, sir?" softly, meekly.

"Because you mistook me for another man?"

"Because—because—it was so bold, so unwomanly in me!" and the white hands covered the blushing face, the fingers just sufficiently separated to permit her to watch the face of her host.

"I am sure you had ample excuse," was the

quiet reply. "You were very anxious to find this Perdue Flickinger, whom I must resemble in an extraordinary degree, since another woman made the same mistake only a few hours ago."

He may have been unconscious of the fact that he was being watched so closely; it might be that he wished to change mockery into earnestness; at any rate, there was an undisguised sneer upon his handsome face that produced another lightning change in his fair visitor.

She dropped her hands, the modest blush fading like magic from her trained face, and there was a cool audacity in both face and voice as she spoke again:

"You recognized by voice, then? Well," as he bowed slightly, "I'm not sorry. It is so much easier to talk openly and freely, without keeping a constant guard over face and tongue. And you look like a man who hates shams. It is a face a woman needn't be afraid to trust."

"Are you sure the mask is entirely dropped?" he quietly asked.

"You think I am soft-soaping you?" the woman laughed, easily. "I did not intend anything of the sort. You have a good face, that—"

"Must strongly resemble the face of a fugitive from justice."

"In a certain degree, yes," was the frank admission. "How closely, you can guess from its having deceived a wife. And yet, unless I miss my guess further than I usually do, you are an officer of the law, instead of being a runaway from justice. Am I not right?"

"A lady is never in the wrong, you know," was the non-committal reply, which was received with a light laugh.

"Mysterious, like all of your cloth, I see! Well, once more, I don't dislike that. If a tolerably good-looking woman can't pump a young and handsome man, little fear of his letting any of the grosser sex draw any secrets from him prematurely. And you are just the man, next to the real Perdue Flickinger, whom I am the happiest to meet just now!"

"In what way can I serve you, ma'am?"

"By bringing me face to face with Perdue Flickinger!" was the swift, intense reply. "Do that, and you can name your own reward!"

A short, peculiar laugh parted the lips of the Gamecock.

"Are you not just a trifle reckless, my lady? Think how much ground that assertion covers! From one poor cent to the amount of the national debt! From life to love—from naught to everything!"

It was a change that startled her, strong though her nerves were, and almost involuntarily her right hand fumbled for the weapon that lay hidden in her lap, while her distended eyes watched him with a growing doubt that was little short of fear.

And that face, how it altered, how it changed, until—

There was naught of acting now in her pale, frightened face, in the staring eyes, in the trembling, shrinking figure. And the low, mocking laugh that came from the lips of her host did little to reassure her.

"Heavens above!" she gasped, hoarsely, almost incoherently. "I was right at first! You are—you are Perdue Flickinger!"

"So you said once or twice before, my dear," laughed the Gamecock, his eyes glowing maliciously. "You contradicted your assertion in the next breath, and now—woman, thy name is—or should be—flip-flop-all-over!"

She stared in doubt, bewildered, fearing, confused, but with a gradual return of her usual spirit as she felt the cold, firm handle of the revolver within her grasp.

"I was a fool then, but I am blinded no longer by your infernal cunning and control of your facial muscles. You are Perdue Flickinger."

"Be careful, my dear, if your secret is to remain a secret. These walls are but little better than paper, and, as you can see, if you take the trouble to cast those remarkably lovely eyes of yours toward the heavens, the partitions do not connect with the ceiling."

Was it a cunning ruse to get a chance to disarm her? Mrs. Flickinger believed this, and clung more tightly to the weapon, now drawn out from its hiding-place into full view.

Jumping Jerry laughed softly, then suddenly added as he started to his feet:

"And that reminds me—a lock is made to be used by the wise!"

He passed to the door, turning the key in its wards as he spoke, turning again—to face the muzzle of a leveled revolver, over the tube of which those big blue eyes were blazing fiercely, ominously.

His brows lifted, his red lips puckered as though to emit a whistle. But instead, he uttered coolly:

"My dear madam—"

"Stop right there, Perdue Flickinger! The time has past for idle compliments between you and me. Take one step without my permission and I'll kill you like a dog that tries to bite me."

"Does that threat apply to me, or only to Perdue Flickinger?"

"You can't throw dust in my eyes again, you cunning demon!" was the fierce retort; and

yet, despite herself that old doubt was rapidly reviving.

"A wicked deceiver, too!" murmured Jumping Jerry, with a faint smile. "That Perdue Flickinger must have been an awful sinner!"

"As none should know better than you. If not he, why have you taken the precaution to lock that door?"

"Well, as I saw you were growing a little (no offense, my dear lady) hysterical again, and I thought it only prudent to guard against intrusion, that might result in unpleasant gossip. Human nature is just the same in Solid City as it is in more polished society, you know!"

Mrs. Flickinger flushed vividly, but it was more from anger than aught of insulted modesty.

"Let their idle tongues wag, if they must. What care I? I am your wife, and have a perfect right to share your room, if it pleases me!"

"You?" with a mock elevation of his brows.

"I was thinking mainly of myself, ungallant as that may sound. I met a charming young lady to-day, and if she should ever catch a hint of this—this social visit at such an unconventional hour, all my new built castles would go down in ruins as completely as though a Kansas zephyr had taken the contract to distribute them over seventeen counties!"

"Look out, Perdue Flickinger!" and the pistol covered his laughing face instead of his heart. "You have driven me to the very verge of desperation, long ago, and it won't take much more to send me over it—and you down to the master you have served so faithfully!"

Jumping Jerry was keen enough to see that this was no idle threat, with those blazing eyes and that white, hard-set face to back it. Like magic his mockery vanished, leaving his handsome countenance grave.

"You are not content with plain fact, and when I try a little fiction, still you are unhappy! Will you please tell me in one word, what I can do to satisfy you, madam?"

"Prove to me you are not Perdue Flickinger! If you fail—I'll kill you as I would a mad-dog! As I would have done before this, but for your devilish cunning in altering the expression of your face!" the woman cried in low, strained tones, her face showing how terrible the ordeal was proving to her.

"I have given you my word that I am not Perdue Flickinger," was the quiet response. "If you decline to accept my simple assurance to that effect, perhaps you can mention some more positive proof. My dearest wish, just at present, is to convince you that I am not in fit condition for slaughtering, especially on another fellow's account."

"Will you submit to the proof I ask?" the woman eagerly cried, her countenance suddenly lightening, as though a happy thought had just occurred to her bewildered brain.

"Surely," with a doleful sigh as he added in a low tone: "One more trial will hardly break my back!"

"Swear that you will—Bah!" with a short, hard laugh as she interrupted herself. "I don't ask you to swear. If you are really Perdue Flickinger, you would take the oath, just for the pleasure of perjuring yourself the next moment!"

"And you think I'm a rascal of that caliber? Thanks for the compliment, madam!" and Jumping Jerry bowed mockingly.

"Business, if you please, sir," the woman uttered, her voice hard, all traces of agitation vanishing before a stern composure. "I can give you a test that will not fail, and I marvel that I did not think of it before. And it is a test to which, if you still love life as you did of old, you will submit without a murmur. Refuse, and I swear to you by the memory of my dead—the dead who met their fate, as I believe before high heaven! at your hands! Refuse, and I'll kill you without a moment's hesitation!"

"Then I would be a precious idiot to decline," laughed Jumping Jerry, with a bow. "Consider your proposition accepted, but—spare my youthful modesty as much as possible, I beg of you, most humbly!"

If he hoped to sting her to fury again, he was fated to be disappointed. In cold, hard tones she spoke:

"If you are not Perdue Flickinger, you will have no excuse for refusing or of hesitation. If you are Perdue Flickinger, there is a small red birthmark on your left breast, directly over your heart, in the exact shape of a spider."

"If only skin-deep, it may have been removed," he smiled.

"Not without leaving a scar. If your shoulder is unmarred, I'll freely beg your pardon for my unjust suspicion, and bid you adieu!"

"If I hesitate to obey, you will shoot me. If I make haste to comply, you can charge me with a feverish desire to banish the light of your charming countenance from—"

"Enough of your folly, sir! Dare your breast, or I'll take the examination on myself, after stilling your scruples with a bullet!"

Jumping Jerry lost no more time, for he saw that the woman was worked up to a pitch of desperation beyond which it would be death to taunt her. And quietly, without the least hesi-

tation, he unfastened his embroidered shirt and turned it back until his swelling chest was bared for inspection.

A sharp exclamation escaped her lips as no red blotch met her eager gaze. Still unsatisfied, she caught up the lamp and held it close to the white bosom. In vain. Neither birthmark nor scar was there!

Jumping Jerry was not Perdue Flickinger!

Pale, trembling, unnerved by the reaction of her intense excitement, Mrs. Flickinger replaced the lamp, turned the key in the lock, opened the door and fled, unhindered, unspoken to by Jumping Jerry.

He closed the door again, fastened his shirt, smiling quietly to himself as the words softly passed his lips:

"I really hope the gentle darling is satisfied with what she discovered! If she is not, I most assuredly am!"

CHAPTER XVII.

PERDUE FLICKINGER TURNS UP.

THE Palace was never a noisy house. George Shanklin, fat, good-natured, easy-going though he was, had his own ideas about running a hotel, and all those who cared to board with him must put up with his rules or hunt another caravansary. Where all out-doors was so plentiful as it was around Solid City, there was no reasonable excuse for any man to kick up a row within those walls.

There was an occasional exciting discussion over these rules when they were quite new, but Honest George managed to hold his own, thanks to the physical arguments offered his side by sundry of his guests who also objected to having the Palace turned into a free-and-easy. And so, in the course of time, it came to be generally understood that, though a man might go to bed with his boots on, if he saw fit, he must not expect to rouse the entire house to witness his performing said feat, without paying their price for the trouble he was putting them to.

Once or twice this was done, but with each repetition the scale of prices ran higher, until it became a serious question to even the wildest of the eccentrics whether it wouldn't be money in their pockets to blow their own brains out before giving the Palace crowd a chance.

Thus it came that while Solid City was in such a ferment over the lively incidents that had marked that afternoon and evening, the hotel lay calm and quiet as though forming a portion of the most sleepy and decorous country village in all this wide land.

The lights still shone in the bar, and George Shanklin had not yet retired, for his old cronies were dropping in and melting out again after a most bewildering fashion whenever their enthusiasm grew too powerful for the rules of the establishment.

Up-stairs, too, there were several lights burning, though all was still in that quarter.

One of those lights, turned low, was burning in the chamber of Mrs. Perdue Flickinger, an hour or more after her hasty retreat from the room of Jumping Jerry.

She lay on her bed, her face buried in the diminutive pillow, seeming sound asleep, though she still retained all her garments. At irregular intervals a slight, convulsive tremor would agitate her figure, and a subdued sound not unlike a groan break the stillness of the room.

With unusually strong nerves for one of her sex, Mrs. Flickinger had been greatly shaken by that peculiar interview with Jumping Jerry, the man whom, until the last, she had believed her long-sought husband, Perdue Flickinger. The strange behavior of the Gamecock, and the sudden fears of death which came over her as the adroit actor made her believe him the fugitive criminal, together with the abrupt and strange manner in which her doubts had been dispelled, gave her a shock from which she was slow to rally. Fleeing to her room, she flung herself on the bed, hiding her face, trying to shut out the past and its black recollections; but in vain. And she was lying thus, seemingly asleep, when another strange circumstance occurred.

A dark, shadowy head slowly rose above the low partition that divided her chamber from another on the same side of the narrow corridor. It remained motionless for several minutes, with only the dark slouched hat and those gleaming eyes visible above the partition. Then, as though satisfied that the woman was sleeping soundly, the owner of that hat and those eyes slowly, carefully, silently lifted himself into view, first one leg and then the other passing over the frail barrier, to drop down and touch the floor without making sound enough to waken a sleeping cat, had the little chamber contained such a sentry.

Then, noiselessly as though shod in feathers, the bold intruder crept to the door and made sure the key was turned in the lock. As he did this, there was a faint sound of grating metal, and with a start Mrs. Flickinger lifted her head, a hoarse gasp of mingled fear and wonder escaping her as she beheld that somber form.

Almost before her reddened eyes could fully realize his presence, the man in the mask whipped forth a vicious-looking knife, and with a

single cat-like leap gained her side, one firm hand clapped over her lips, the other pressing the knife so close to her white throat that a tiny drop of blood stained its point. Low, smooth, but filled with a certain merciless resolution came his voice:

"Now don't make a fool of yourself, my dear, or somebody'll have to suffer. It would be an awful pity to spoil the looks of that dainty throat, but I'll have to do it if you cut up rusty!"

"What—who—how dare you!" gasped the terrified woman, even in that moment of terror thinking of the proprieties of society. "If anybody should come and—"

"You used to pray in those olden days, Rilla," softly laughed the mask, plainly enjoying the fears of his feeble adversary. "If you have not forgotten entirely how, just sling in a little one extra for your guardian angel to keep away all curious prowlers while my visit lasts. If any should come, and you should insist on asking them in for an introduction to your—well, say visitor!—Solid City would have a chance to do so if proud over the planting of its first lady."

"You—Perdue Flickinger!" gasped the woman, sinking back, her muscles growing limp and powerless as she stared wildly, fearfully in his eyes that showed so dark and brilliant through the holes in his mask. "You—may kind heaven protect me now!"

A low, mocking laugh came from the lips of the masked man, and his tones showed how little he respected or cared for her terrors.

"Kind heaven is good, Marilla Flickinger, and particularly good as coming from your lips! Bah! good devil would sound more appropriate for either you or me, little angel!"

Whether he so intended or not, this speech lent the shivering woman a sudden courage, and pushing away the armed hand that still kept close to her bare throat, she spoke:

"What do you want here, you graceless rascal? How dare you come into my chamber without—"

"May not a husband pay back the call of his wife? Are all the little privileges to be given the lady, and none to the gentleman?"

A low cry escaped her lips, and a hot glow leaped into her face. All traces of fear vanished, and her eyes were gleaming angrily as she confronted the audacious intruder.

"You? How dare you, sir? Go! and at once, or I'll rouse the house, to have your insolence fitly punished!"

"When I would declare myself your husband," was the cool retort. "I would call yourself as proof. I would tell the honest guests of your visit to my chamber, and how long that call lasted. I would ask you, on oath, if you did not call me your husband and even claim your rights from a marital point of view. I would gently but firmly hint at the consequences which follow interference between husband and wife, and after what the citizens have this day seen of Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown, I hardly think a second hint will be necessary. Then, when they had departed, leaving us to ourselves, my little wife, we would argue the matter over at our leisure."

"You are not my husband!" hoarsely muttered the woman, held in check by that vicious playfulness, but with all her womanly nature aroused to anger and indignation. "I thought you were, at first, but you proved my mistake. If you were anything like a man, you would not dare presume on that unfortunate move of mine."

"A mistake, sure enough," was the cool retort, as the man removed his mask for a moment, revealing the handsome features of Jumping Jerry Titus. "You are ready to take oath that I am Jeremiah Titus, and not Perdue Flickinger, I suppose?"

"Whoever you may be, you are not Perdue Flickinger," was the positive retort. "If you were, the red spider would show on your bosom."

"Anything like this?" was the quick response, as the intruder laid bare his left breast, where, on the white skin, in startling relief, was a scarlet blotch which strongly resembled the portrait of a spider, fat, hairy, with long legs.

With a gasping cry Mrs. Flickinger sunk back to her former position, gazing at that curious mark as though suddenly fascinated. She was pale as death, trembling in every fiber as though under the influence of an ague chill of the worst description.

Covering over the mark, her strange visitor added:

"There is where the mistake comes in, Rilla. I hardly thought the bluff would succeed, for in the old days you had a precious keen eye of your own in that charming head. I would have given long odds that a little impudence and a bit of flesh-colored court-plaster couldn't shut up your eyes, then. It is the effects of increasing age and—say, the dissipations of dear Paris!"

The shiver was plainer than ever now, and as she buried her face in the pillow, a hollow moan of fear and anguish came to his ears. His face grew graver as he covered it over with the sable mask once more. His tones were less mocking as he added:

"Knowing as I did what you were hunting me for, little one, I gave you that scare, as the surest method of keeping you from returning to your first suspicions. I thought if I could bluff you off thus, you would soon give over the search in this quarter, and leave me to hoe my own row; but then, after you left me so hurriedly, I got to thinking—thinking over the good old days when you and I were young, and happy—for we were happy then, Rilla!"

"And as I lay thinking, dreaming, I began to wonder. What? Well, you may laugh at me—very likely you will—but it is the gospel truth. I began to wonder if, after all, you and I mightn't come together once more and burying the past, be as we were in those olden days!"

Mrs. Flickinger partly turned her head, gazing fixedly into his eyes as he spoke on:

"It startles you, little pet? Well, that is not so strange, perhaps. There is a good deal of the past for us both to bury, isn't there? We are both older. We have both of us seen a good deal of the world. We both have sundry little skeletons stored away in secret; but why bring them out to the light of day? Why not place the seal of silence and forgetfulness on the locks, and commence life anew?"

"What do you mean? What are you driving at, Perdue Flickinger?"

She raised up in bed, gazing keenly, steadily at him, as though trying to penetrate that sable covering and read his actual thoughts.

"What I say, Rilla," was the grave response. "Neither you nor I can show a perfectly clean record of the past, I'm afraid. But all the same, I loved you once, better and more entirely than I have ever loved since. You are not quite so fresh and fair as you were then, but I have toned down a little, too. It might be—if you are willing."

"What might be, Perdue Flickinger?"

"A resurrection of the past," was the soft reply, those brilliant eyes growing softer, milder, as she watched them. "We have both gone a little astray, but not so far that we can't cross back again, if needs be. If I can forget those little extravagances in Paris and—"

A hard, bitter laugh checked his further speech, and Mrs. Flickinger leaned toward him, shaking one white finger in his masked face.

"What would I have to forget? My blighted youth! My murdered parents! My faith in human nature! My belief in Heaven and all that is pure and holy! For, until I met you, all these were mine! If I have sinned since—and to you I do not deny it—you were the cause, and on your head will be the consequences when we are called to the seat of judgment!"

"You really think so, little girl?" he softly laughed.

The white finger struck across his hidden lips, and cut his mocking speech short. Hard, menacing, her voice added:

"For years you have haunted me and made my life a perfect hell upon earth! I tried to flee from your reach, but with the devilish ingenuity you kept reminding me of your existence, kept threatening me, kept me in bodily and mental torments. Then—I grew desperate. I set out to hunt and haunt you instead. I had been a poor, silly, weak fool! Who would believe you? A murderer, a fugitive from justice with a price on your head?"

"It was slow and trying work, but I persisted. I vowed I would find you or find your grave. I have found you. I have only to lift my voice and denounce you as Perdue Flickinger, too—"

"You think I am in your power, then?" he laughed, meaningly.

"Even if you murder me my vengeance would overtake you!"

"Kill you, my precious? Kill the lovely wife whose charms made me once the most envied of men? No, no, Rilla!" and dropping the knife he held up a bottle, shaking it until its contents sparked in the lamp-light. "I would not mar that pretty throat with touch of knife. I would simply—throw this vitriol in your face, leap out the window and vanish once more, as Perdue Flickinger has so often vanished from the sight and scent of the bloodhounds!"

Mrs. Flickinger shrunk back, shivering, covering her face with her hands. She could have faced his knife, laughed at his pistol, while her feelings were so wrought up, while she hated him so intensely; but the thought of such frightful disfigurement wholly unnerved her. It would be ten thousand times worse than death!

"I thought you would think better of it, Rilla, when I came to put the whole case before your tender eyes," he uttered, maliciously.

"You will reconsider, gentle pet?"

"What do you want—devil?" gasped the poor woman.

"No, an angel," with a low, guarded laugh. "In other words, my wife. I have taken a sudden fancy to bring back the good old days of yore, and to do so successfully, I need your charming presence."

"Never! better death than that!"

"Better disfigurement, too?" he uttered, mercilessly, but with his tones so soft and gentle that one who could not have distinguished his words, would have thought him the most loving

husband in all the world. "Think of it, little girl. A half-pint of vitriol. Enough to bathe your face, neck, hands, all! It is curious stuff, this sulphuric acid! It does its work so quickly, so effectually! No botch-work there! A little sprinkling, and *pouf!* there you have it! And it makes a handsome woman so inexpressibly lovely! It heightens her natural charms so greatly, that a leprous Chinaman would turn sick at the stomach just to glance at the charming creature!"

She sunk back on the bed, cowed, powerless to resist this smiling, mocking demon in human shape.

"What do you want?" she murmured, scarcely realizing what words passed her lips.

"My wife," was his instant response. "You have been hunting me. You have hired men at high salaries to find Perdue Flickinger for you. You are wasting time and money. I will save both by removing the temptation. I will take you away where you can have all the Perdue Flickinger you can wish for."

"Never! I would rather die! You would murder me, even as you murdered them—my poor father and mother!"

Perhaps it was as well for the poor woman that her eyes were hidden, so that she could not see the fiery glitter that leaped into his brilliant orbs.

"Poor child!" and his gloved hand gently caressed her head, causing her to shiver anew as at the touch of some loathed, slimy, poisonous reptile. "That is another one of your strange delusions! You will soon learn to forget them, when we are alone together, on our resurrected bridal trip. And now, Rilla, if you will get ready to go with—"

"I will not! Kill me, if you will, but I'll never—"

"Not even if I leave the vitriol behind, Rilla? Or shall I leave it with you? Come," and his voice changed, growing hard, cold, threatening, wholly without pity or mercy. "You are going with me, your lawful husband. If you go quietly, so much the better for our future happiness. If you cut up rusty so soon, there'll be trouble."

"Spare me, Perdue—"

"First show that you deserve my leniency. Come with me quietly, and I promise you your liberty without the slightest injury, if I cannot convince you by cool argument that it is better for us to put the past behind us and begin the world anew together. Make a row, and you force me to use harsh means. I can take you through the window and off to my horses, long before the people of the house, startled by your cries, could discover your abduction. But I don't want to run any risks. It might be that we would be intercepted, and I would have to abandon you to save my own life—these citizens are such headlong, headstrong fellows!"

"But, if I should, Rilla, I would leave the vitriol with you!"

Great as was her terror, the poor woman could not doubt his meaning as he breathed those words into her ears. He was merciless. She knew he would keep his threat to the very letter. And so, weak, fearful, striving in vain to see a single gleam of hope, she rose from the bed.

"What am I to do?" she hoarsely muttered, looking so pale, so old, so ghastly, that even he was startled.

"First, drink a little of this brandy," he said, producing a flask of liquor and supporting her trembling figure with one arm.

She obeyed, feeling the need of some such stimulant. She drank so heartily that he laughed shortly, with a sneer.

"Your powers of suction are marvelous, little charmer! If you are often taken that way, reckon I'll have to set up a private still of my own, when we get settled down in our new home!"

"What am I to do?" she asked, stolidly, the powerful dose seeming to calm her agitation and restore her strength as by magic.

"Put on your wraps, and come with me. I don't care to run the risk of breaking one of your precious limbs by dropping you out of the window. We will go down the stairs, like any other married couple."

A red glow shot into her eyes, and though she quickly drooped her lids, she was not speedy enough to hide her thoughts from him.

"Don't you think it, my dear," he laughed, as he held the bottle of vitriol before her eyes for an instant. "I have a perfect horror of scenes, you know, and should you step to converse with any luckless devil whom chance might throw in our way, I'd go off in a huff, leaving you to mourn your lost husband, and your lost beauty. You comprehend?"

She made no reply, her last hope vanishing. She put on her bonnet, wrapped a light shawl about her shoulders, then turned toward him, pale, cold, haggard, seemingly aged a dozen years since his coming.

He took off his black mask and thrust it into his pocket. He took her arm, drawing it within his own, holding it with the hand that held the bottle of sulphuric acid, opened the door and passed down stairs.

He used so little caution in doing so that their

passage was heard, and opening the door that communicated from the narrow hall into the bar, George Shanklin looked out. The bright lamplight fell full upon the handsome face of the sport, and though he immediately averted his head, speaking in low tones to his companion, hurrying her on, the fat little host stared after them in evident surprise.

Until then he did not know Jumping Jerry was acquainted with the charming Miss Maud Vernon.

The couple passed rapidly away from the hotel, and as he transferred the bottle of vitriol to his pocket, the handsome rascal spoke:

"That should put your romantic fears to rest, Rilla. The puffy little villain recognized us both, and if any accident should happen to you, unfortunately, on this little trip, it would be decidedly unhealthy for yours truly to return to Solid City. What a hue and cry the amorous George would raise, to be sure!"

"Where are you going to take me, Perdue?" she asked, her courage gradually reviving, partly the effects of that chance encounter with the host of the Palace, and partly that the warmth and glow of the brandy was making itself felt.

"For a moonlight ramble, precious," was the soft reply, as the handsome rascal bent his head and suddenly pressed his lips to hers.

She did not start or shrink. The liquor was dulling her brain as well as her fears of bodily injury. She had loved this man in the years gone by, as she had never loved before nor since. True, he was a ten-fold criminal. She still believed that he had murdered her parents, either indirectly or with his own hands. But, too, she had passed through many wild and dark scenes since those days. Her conscience was dulled. She believed all men were evil, and—

It was partly the liquor, as we have said; but she was also beginning to feel again the peculiar fascination which this graceless scamp ever exercised over young and handsome women when he chose to display his powers. The very touch of his arm sent the warm blood to leaping through her veins, and when his lips touched hers—it would not be such an impossible task to bury and forget the black past, she caught herself thinking.

And Perdue Flickinger read her thoughts as easily as though they had been printed in plain capitals on her forehead.

"If we could go on and on and never have to glance back at the past, it would not be so terrible, would it, Rilla?" he added, his voice low, soft, full of mellow music such as had made her so exquisitely happy in those olden days when she was innocent and pure and loving only him of all her many suitors. "If we could call yonder bright orb our honeymoon in earnest, little one? And why not?" he suddenly uttered, as he paused and drew her yielding figure closely to his bosom, pressing his lips to hers ardently, his brilliant eyes looking down into her blue orbs with a longing either intense or admirably counterfeited. "Yonder is my man in charge of our horses. We have but to mount and forget all we leave behind us—to ride on and on until we are tired of riding, then stop and—"

With a swift motion he unwound his arms, glancing sharply around them, one hand snatching a pistol from his waist. Then, as a low, pawing sound, mingling with a muttered ejaculation from the clump of trees before them, came to their ears, Perdue laughed shortly.

"Bah! my new-found bliss makes me jealously suspicious, little one! I half-fancied we were followed, but it is only the horses. Come, a few steps further, and then—good-by for a few hours."

"What are you going to do, Perdue? Not—my husband?" faintly uttered Mrs. Flickinger, beginning to tremble anew.

"Do, my foolish little wife? Simply put you under charge of a true and tried dependent, to take you to our future home."

"And you, dear?"

"Will be with you as fast as the wings of true love can carry me, pet, the instant I can wind up my business in Solid City. It is of the greatest importance, or you may be sure I would not lose a single hour, now that we are reunited once more. You will have patience, Rilla?"

She made no response. The heavy dose of brandy was proving too much even for her, after the intense excitement that night. She hung heavily on his arm, murmuring something that even his keen ears could not exactly interpret.

He uttered a low, peculiar whistle, then led her on to the clump of timber, where he was respectfully greeted by a man in a black mask, who seemed surprised to find his chief without a disguise. Two good horses stood near, tied to hanging boughs, saddled in readiness for the road.

"Ha! Dougald, I trust you did not grow impatient at my delay," Perdue Flickinger said, lightly, as a master might address a trusted dependent. "Well, we are here at last. This is my wife, whom you will honor and serve as you would me. I place her in your care, and if harm befalls her, woe be unto you, for she's the very apple of my eye!"

"I'll be keeful, boss," was the quiet response. "Of course you will, good boy!" with a light laugh. "Turn your head for a moment—sc!"

Again he kissed the poor woman, then lifted her into the saddle. At a sign the man also mounted, then Perdue Flickinger added:

"Take her home and remember my instructions. I will be there soon."

The fellow grasped both reins and rode away, leaving Perdue Flickinger standing there watching them until they vanished amid the shadows. Then he turned and strode back to Solid City.

From the ground under a bush rose up a trembling form, with pale, anguish-marked features. Poor Ora Barcus! She had seen, heard all!

CHAPTER XVIII.

COCKFIGHTING EXTRAORDINARY!

"AND we'll all drink stone blind, when Johnny" slings out his poison receptacles after the graceful style which has made him a synonym for skillful and scientific tumbler-juggling at every irrigating station between this and Sundown. Business before pleasure, gentlemen, is an admirable motto. And then, I can cut a throat with so much more ease and grace after having joined the victim in a friendly toast!"

It was two days later in the week, and for Tuesday night there was an unusual crowd gathering in and around The Pit. And a single glance would be sufficient to convince the experienced that there was something more than ordinary in the wind.

The card-tables were not occupied, though this might have been well the case where so many excited individuals were gathered together, for then comes the greatest harvest of the steel-nerved gamblers. The main part of the crowd was to be found in the saloon proper, and prominent among them all was the tall, lithe figure of Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown.

Word had spread, after its magical fashion, that the "new chief" was going to make his three opponents face him in some sort of queer game, or else drive them to water. Ever since the first whisper went abroad of those peculiar conditions imposed by Jumping Jerry before he would consent to meet the angry sports at their own game, the curiosity of Solid City, as represented by its inhabitants of every degree, had grown and waxed impatient with the passage of each hour, and when the rumor spread that at last the "chief" was about to "crowd things," all else was dropped and everybody swore they must see the fun if it took a wheel!

Not far from Jumping Jerry, as he leaned gracefully with one elbow on the counter, stood Albino Dave, pale, stern, his face as unreadable as that of a sphinx, or like it was when he sat dealing faro for the heavy plungers. His hands were both bandaged, but that his worst fears were partly false, one could see from the ease with which he managed his glass. For, though he felt in his heart that either Jumping Jerry or himself would never live to witness the rising of another sun, Albino Dave was no sullen churl, to hang back and refuse to drink with the man whose throat he was longing to cut.

Near him was Moses Redheffer, all alive, though presenting a ludicrous imitation of the portraits published by "Brother Jonathan" of Heenan and Sayers, immediately after the memorable passage of arms at Farnborough. It was a face that presented to the curious eye, more colors and hues than a maple tree after a frost.

"Not so durned pritty, mebbe," he grinned, as he nodded at the well-frescoed frontispiece reflected in the large mirror behind the bar, "but a heap big hunk o' savey more than a week ago, now I tell ye!"

Beyond him lounged Consumptive Johnny, the same weak, bilious-looking little rascal of yore, smiling, sneering, only his glittering eyes betraying what poison he was longing to spit forth whenever they rested for a moment on the frank, open countenance of the Gamecock.

No one in all Solid City had dared twit him, even indirectly, on the weakness he had shown that memorable night at The Pit when Jumping Jerry "marked his pit!" Yet he had not sought concealment. He called three times each day at the bar to ask what word the Gamecock had left there for him. On being answered none, he would take a drink and quietly walk away again. Then, like Albino Dave and Red Mose, he received a tersely worded note from Jumping Jerry, requesting their presence at The Pit at nine o'clock, Tuesday Eve, or a satisfactory excuse, instead.

"Your health, gentlemen!" cried the Gamecock, as he lifted the barely-tinged glass above his head, bowing first to one and then to the other of his intended pupils.

"The last nail in your coffin—and long life to the man who owns the hand that clinches it fast!" sharply uttered Consumptive Johnny, returning the bow with a cold smile.

"That takes a steady hand, and yours is trembling already, poor little fellow!" laughed the Gamecock. "The result of your recent fit of— Well, let that flea stick by the wall!"

"Gentlemen, all! before getting down to solid

fun, there are a few words I wish to speak to you. Not a speech. Simply an explanation. And those who don't care to listen, can Luzz Johnny-behind-the-bar at my expense. After all, it is this trio of sports who have pledged their words to help me amuse the citizens this evening, to whom my words are more particularly addressed; and I have little fear of their running away—just at present."

"Ef you kin teach us that, it'll be more'n anybody else hes dene, an' it's Red Mose that snorts, honey!" chuckled the giant from Last Chance.

"You'll never hear a wise man run down another whom he has made up his mind to lick, Goliah," smiled the Gamecock. "It's a poor dealer who cheapens his own wares; and that lovely scalp of yours is fated to dangle at my belt before the moon gets tired of smiling on Solid City this bout. I've got a little canary bird that is just aching for a new wig, and I'll give her yours as a curiosity."

"When you pit it, critter!"

"It's about ripe, dandy keifer."

"Is this your explanation sir?" coldly asked Albino Dave.

The Gamecock bowed with a grateful smile.

"I thank you for bringing me back to my mutton, Pink-eyes. It is a serious fault, I admit, but when I hear another crow—even though it be but the cracked notes of a dunghill—I can't hold my hush. If you will listen—here she goes!"

"When I struck out for Solid City, it was with one eye opened to business, and the other squinting just a little in the direction of pure, innocent fun. Money was my main object, but I wouldn't throw any of the little side issues over my shoulder."

"You know how the first hitch came into the harness, Albino. You lowered your head, scraped your wings, set out your backle and flew at the strange cock as though you had only to crow to have the battle scored to your side. Instead, you got left. That was all right. There never yet lived a cock so good but that, as time rolled on, another could not be brought into the pit to beat him."

"That wouldn't suit you, though. You claimed foul where your own handler admitted all was fair. You swore to get even. You tried it on. You rubbed it in until—well, you got left. I gave you your life, when I could have taken it much easier than I rapped you across both knuckles with my little blue pills."

"You, Moses Sanguinarybull, come next. You asked for information as a healthy tramp asks for grub from a little woman. I gave you a polite reply, which you snatched at as a surly dog grabs a bone. Then, because you didn't jump the claim of your man in less than a minute, back you come with your tail in the air, pawing, horning, red-hot in a swarm of Luffaluggans. You opened your battery on me, and murdered my pard!"

"'Twas only a durned rooster," muttered the giant, sullenly.

"Worth more than all such rascals as you between here and sunset! Dandy was my pard. He was all I had left on earth to love and trust. You murdered him, and that made me reckless. I licked you. I could have killed you with less waste of time, but as I recalled the white sport here, I thought I'd take it out in sport, in fun, you know."

"Then you, Johnny-with-the-whooping-cough! From bad to worse, until in matching with you, I got to the lowest possible pit of degradation. In the others, one could see some signs of manhood and common decency. In you, not a morsel of humanity. Decide you, the vilest of all moral lepers shines out like an angel of light and purity, fresh from the realms of paradise. Not one redeeming trait, since you dropped your last feeble shield when your boasted nerve failed you."

His tones were low and even, showing no excitement. His face was stern-set and hard. It was like some naturalist gazing from a safe distance down upon a horrible, soul-sickening abortion, keeping his leathing in check until he could determine what foul connection had given birth to this vile monstrosity.

Consumptive Johnny felt this, too. The hectic spots glowed vividly in his sunken cheeks, and his glittering eyes looked more than ever like those of an enraged serpent. But he said nothing. Even his usually fluent speech failed him then. He could only give a sickly smile and wait—wait for the chance to make his fangs enter the quick!

"One after another you three crowded me, a stranger. You did the best you knew how to send me over the range on a never-come-lack ticket. Naturally, I struck back the best I knew how. It was no even battle on my part. I wasn't out-classed, nor too heavily weighted; but I was a strange bird on a strange walk, and by killing one cock, I'd only have a dozen others flying at me. That was why I muffed my spurs, and only looked for a knock-out instead of a clean win. I was playing for the gallery, you understand, to change the metaphor a little. If I could once get their hands, the rest would come naturally enough."

"I believe I have won them. I feel that if it

came to a solid vote, my name against all of yours, I would rake the persimmons. If not just yet, I would to-morrow, for this night I've set apart to make you three lads cut your own throats in despair, or else hunt other stamping-grounds to spare your blushes."

"Talk is cheap, but money makes business," muttered Albino Dave.

"Business she am, then, my dainty sport with the pink eyes! Business until you can't rest! Business for you three. Pleasure for me. Fun by the bucketful for these honest gents! Unless you rather own up cowed and slink out of Solid City between this and sun-up."

"After you is manners," grinned Red Mose, by no means terrified.

"If you follow my example, beauty-face," laughed the Gamecock, "you can go back to your range and tell your brother heifers that you never came nearer being a man than this very night! But, business it is!"

At a sign from him, the barkeeper handed out a neat package, and as he removed the fastenings, Jumping Jerry continued:

"One and all, you pledged yourselves to meet me at my own gam, so long as I didn't try to ask too heavy odds of you. I admit the odds are rather heavy in my favor, but I can't well make them any lighter, seeing there's only three men in Solid City dirt-mean enough to play the same hand you tried to ring in on me. Still, the three of you in a lump ought to make a tolerable show against me—and I only a little stag, that hasn't fairly shaken the shell off its tail as yet!"

"I ask no odds, sir," coldly uttered Albino Dave. "Crippled as I am, I'm a better man than you ever dared dream of being!"

"In your mind," bowed the Gamecock, adding decisively: "You can go back on your own terms if you see fit. I can't make a gentleman out of a rascal. You swore to meet me at my own figures. You will do so, or flatly go back on your word."

"That's enough," was the icy retort.

"Glad of it. My heels are itching to relieve my tongue," laughed the Gamecock from Sundown, as he opened the paper and revealed six curious articles, shining and wicked-looking to the eager eyes that saw.

They were three pair of spurs, such as worn by horsemen, strong and serviceable, provided with stout straps to firmly attach them to the heel. But where the rowels usually showed, now gleamed as many bright steel gaffs, just such as are used on gamecocks in the pit, only considerably longer and stronger!

Jumping Jerry smiled (it was almost a sneer) as he saw the swift change that came over the faces of his enemies. Did they divine what was the ordeal before them?

"Business you asked for, and here it is, my dandies! We will each put on two of those gaffs. We will have our arms securely tied behind our backs. We will enter a ring of such size as our chosen judge may see fit to prescribe, and then—fight or run away, just as our grit or the lack of sand will have it."

There was utter silence as the Gamecock ended. It was such an unlooked-for proposition that those who heard, were in doubt whether to laugh or frown. But Jumping Jerry was in deadly earnest.

"And still you are not happy!" he laughed, his voice full of mocking contempt as he glanced swiftly from one blank face to the other. "Isn't this pure business? If you have any lingering doubts, I pledge you my word of honor that in five minutes after we enter the ring, positive conviction shall take the place of those doubts. You'll think you never in all your life tumbled into a hornets' nest one-half so full of business!"

"You have our word. Go on with your foolery. After that, look out for me, my dandy!" shortly uttered Albino Dave, flushing hotly as he saw himself made ridiculous after this fashion.

Jumping Jerry turned to Colonel Fletcher, who stood near by.

"You will take charge of the matter, colonel, of course, as the only other gentleman fully acquainted with the cocking rules. Let some men make a ring—flour or meal will answer, as the moonlight is clear enough. For the rest, your judgment is ours. Eh, gentlemen?"

"Anybody, durned ef I keer," grinned Red Mose, who seemed the only one of the trio who could see the ludicrous side of the matter. "Good Lawd, critter, ef I ever git one squar' hump-up-behind at you, the stars 'll see 'nother two-legged planet spittin' blue, green an' yaller all over the milky way! 'Deed, they jes' will, now!"

There was idle talk, merry jests and considerable confusion among the crowd, who eagerly discussed the outcome, betting freely, according to their ideas of odds against pluck and science. But Colonel Fletcher wasted no time, seeming to take pleasure in hurrying matters to a focus.

He had a broad circle of flour spread on the level space outside The Pit, and then gravely inspected the gaffs, pronouncing them perfectly fair and within the rules. He had the four men draw their tools in turn, and then, with his own hands bound their arms firmly behind

their backs, so that they could use only their feet and legs. He buckled the armed spurs on their heels, then led them into the circle, lifting his hand for silence as he spoke coldly, sternly:

"Gentlemen, one and all! This is no mere circus, but a fight for blood. I have been selected judge and referee, with all those titles infer. And I give each man full warning that just as he shall be in ured fair play, just so shall he use or receive no foul play. To the gentlemen outside, I add this:

"You can have your favorites, and can cheer them as much as you please. You can act just as you might were you witnessing a regular cock-fight. But if any one or more of you allow your sympathies to get the better of your judgment, and lead you to attempting any crooked work, I'll reprove you—through my guns!"

"A final word to you, gentlemen in the arena. When I call time, you are free to open the fight. You can, the three of you, attack singly or together. You can trip, push, shove, use any means in your power to get the best of the fight. You can keep at work until one side or the other calls enough. Or until the circle is crossed. That ends the fight, so far as the one crossing it is concerned. If he is forced over, he is defeated. If he crosses it in order to save himself, he is a runaway, and so it will stand recorded against his name, to be posted in The Pit for one month.

"If, by any chance, your hands should come unfasted, I will call time, and all fighting must cease on the instant until the hands can be replaced. If the party thus set free should attempt to use weapons other than those on his heels, I'll shoot him down without mercy!"

"Gentlemen, you have heard the terms and conditions. Are you ready for the word?"

"All ready, heeled, trimmed, and don't need any billing here," laughed Jumping Jerry, lightly.

The others, feeling awkward, sullen, savage, simply nodded; and then the colonel gave the word, and the strange fight began.

The Gamecock from Sundown leaped high into the air, whetting the finely tempered steel gaffs together until they gave out a musical sound. And as his feet once more touched the ground he gave vent to a crow so clear, so sharp, so musical that there came faint echoes of defiance from the colonel's pen inside.

His three antagonists stood awkwardly, watching him like men who were at a loss how to act. Only their fear of ridicule, of being thought lacking in sand—that great bugbear of the fighting man—kept them from beating a hasty retreat from the ring. But that would never do, even though death should be the penalty for remaining.

"Perdition!" growled Red Mose, savagely. "We kin rush the durned critter over the line easy enough, ef we can't mash him down. All together—sock it to him, the varmint!"

There was a rush, but it came from the other side. Even as the giant spoke, Jumping Jerry darted forward, and as they instinctively opened to admit him, he dodged aside, and with a swift stroke drew an involuntary cry from Red Mose's lips. The blood was streaming from a wound just above his boot-top!

And then, the eye could hardly follow the swift changes. Jumping Jerry was apparently all over the ring at one and the same time. He seemed made of india-rubber, and to possess a full score of feet. Here and there, now crouching, now leaping high into the air, but always laughing, always lashing out with those marvelously active feet, now attacking one, now another of his antagonists, wounding and getting away untouched from their clumsy efforts, until they, as all others had seen long ago, realized that they had but two chances.

One was to crowd him over the line of flour, and so put him out of the fight. The other was to trip him up and then, by sheer force and weight, compel him to cry enough, or—and this each man was longing for most ardently!—stab him to death with their gaffs!

Desperately they strove to do one or the other, and finally there came a breathless cry from the spectators as they saw the Gamecock apparently penned in, the three men abreast rushing him over the line.

Then—was it not glorious?

The Gamecock leaped high into the air, doubling up in a ball that shot directly for the faces of his taller enemies. His feet shot out, and one of them sent Albino Dave reeling away, sick, dizzy, just as he had once before, though in a lesser degree. The other caught Consumptive Johnny as he instinctively ducked, by the back, and hurled him cursing and gasping out of the ring and into the thickest of the crowd!

"John Treman is out of the fight!" cried the clear, stern voice of the referee. "He will make any further play at his own peril!"

Jumping Jerry dropped to his feet with a clear laugh, seemingly undistressed or affected in wind by his marvelous exertions. He cast a keen glance around him, then, with a sharp cry, dropped to the earth in a heap, as though his ankles had suddenly given way beneath him!

Red Mose was staring aghast at this unexpected defeat where success had seemed all but

assured, but as Jumping Jerry dropped, a snarling cry escaped him, and amid the indignant cries of the crowd, he rushed upon the seemingly helpless man.

"Now I hev got ye, Perdue Flickinger!" he grated, crouching to leap with his great weight upon the helpless man. "I swore it when—"

"And swore to a lie, you bull with a maiden name!" laughed the Gamecock, rolling swiftly over as the giant rose to his leap.

Jumping Jerry flung up his feet and kicked the giant so violently that his balance was destroyed, casting him forward on his knees and face. And then, lithe as a panther, active as his own pet gamecock whose defiant crow he so marvelously imitated, Jumping Jerry turned rear to the scrambling giant, leaping up and shooting out his armed heels with a dexterity that sent the reddened steel home in the fleshy parts thus rendered the most prominent, each fly driving the cursing, groaning, terrified giant nearer the line of flour, forcing him on his face as often as he could partly raise the fore part of his body from the ground.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo-oo-oo!" crowed the Gamecock, sending his spurs home again. "Sing your little song, my gentle heifer, or those trowsers of yours'll do to sift flour through, if you ain't over nice in the region of your grub depot! Sing small, and sing quick, or you'll do to sell for a skimmer! Good Lawd! what fun we pore critters is havin'!"

Wild yells and roars of laughter came from the excited crowd, who had eyes only for this supremely ridiculous scene. Still dizzy, Albino Dave was crouching near the "dead line." Consumptive Johnny was—

Instinctively Colonel Fletcher glanced in the direction where he had vanished from view a few moments before. He saw something that drew a loud, angry yell from his lips as he raised his revolver.

"Look out! Foul play! Back, you devil, or die!"

At the shrill and emphatic warning, Jumping Jerry glanced quickly in that direction. He saw the colonel, tripped up by some one whom he failed to distinguish, plunge headlong, his revolver exploding as its muzzle struck the ground. He saw a lithe figure leaping upon him, knife in hand, and recognized Consumptive Johnny, free, bent on foul murder!

With a clear, defiant yell of rage and hatred, he harked forward, leaped into the air, and then—there was a clashing of steel—a gasping cry—and the two men fell to the ground together!

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW HIS SINS FOUND HIM OUT.

ONE moment of breathless silence and painful suspense, then that entangled heap in the center of the ring dissolved, one figure lying silent and motionless, the other scrambling to its feet, to answer back the wild, enthusiastic yell that broke simultaneously from the crowd, with a clear, clarion-like cock-crow!

"Cock-a-doodle-doo-oo-oo!" Give me room according to my size, and you'll see the fur and feathers—Hello, Pink-eyes!"

He must have been very carping indeed who could have found fault with the Gamecock for neglecting business, once that curious duel began. And now, with a leap and a dash, he hurled himself against Albino Dave, who had partially recovered from the heavy shock, and another triumphant crow parted his lips as the faro dealer staggered across the white line, falling headlong with the breath knocked out of his body.

Red Mose had managed to regain his feet during the respite so unexpectedly afforded him, but now, as he saw his indomitable foe preparing to resume the "fun," he shook his head and cried with a sickly attempt at merriment:

"Der-durned ef you do, Per Flick er no Flick! I boller. Cave. Equal. Beg. I'd do wuss then that, rather then hev them cussed spurs ramblin' round my lack-door any more—Good Lawd! reckon I would!"

"Just to complete the pattern, heifer? One minute more, and I'd have a picture fit to hang on the first line at the Royal Academy! One minute longer, dear lad!" pleaded the Gamecock whetting the steel gaffs together after a blood-curdling fashion.

"Think I'm a durned hog, as well's a fool!" grinned the giant from Last Chance. "Think I'm goin' to hang that pattern up whar everybody kin see it? Reckon I'm goin' round making a speckle out o' my own copperosity? Not much! Wouldn't trouble ye fer a dollar. Good-by, high-flyer! See you ag'in when my hide grows up!"

With figure so erect that it bent backward, moving his long legs without lending a joint, in his efforts to keep his clothes from rubbing and chafing against his lacerated hide, Moses Redheffer stalked out of the ring, the last of the trio to leave it, but like the rest a defeated man.

"Thank God!" broke with a great pant from the lips of Colonel Fletcher as he lowered his pistol which, from the moment he had regained his destroyed balance, he had kept covering the prostrate figure of Consumptive Johnny.

"You've come out top o' the pile, Jerry, and now it only remains to punish that p'izen cur, John Tremain, for—"

The Gamecock from Sundown laughed shortly as the old soldier uttered those impulsive words. He glanced toward the silent figure, his red lips curling, his blue eyes flashing vividly.

"I wouldn't borrow any trouble on his account, colonel."

"But he played foul, the hound!"

"As might have been expected. But he got more than he gave."

"You don't mean—"

A sharp cry from one of the curious spectators who had stolen forward to examine the motionless body of Consumptive Johnny, answered the colonel's question even before it could wholly cross his lips.

"Too dead to skin! A hole in his head big enough to stick your thumb into! Whooray fer the Gamecock from Sundown!"

Jumping Jerry briefly nodded to the colonel as the excited crowd made the air fairly tremble with their wild yells and cheers. It was so. In that magic leap, he had warded off the vicious blow with one gaff, driving the other to his heel in the skull of the dastard, who fell to the earth as suddenly and as surely dead as though stricken by a thunderbolt.

"Gentlemen!" cried Colonel Fletcher, wildly swinging his arms in order to still the wild tumult and gain the attention of the crowd. "One moment—I ask it for the sake of and in the name of Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown, who—"

"Is the durndest, dirtiest murderer this side o' sun-up!" roared George Shanklin, as he leaped upon the bound athlete from behind, coiling his stumpy leg around his prisoner, throttling him with his fat arms. "An' I call on all honest men to help me hold the critter fast!"

"It's gospel truth, gentlemen of the jury!" cried Judge Baldy Stopover as he also pounced upon the Gamecock, throwing all together in a heap at the feet of the amazed and scandalized "I charge said Jeremiah Titus with foully murdering my client, Mrs. Perdue Flickinger! I summon one and all within sound of my voice to—"

"Climb out of this, you drunken ass!" growled Fletcher, as he recovered from his temporary confusion, and fastened a mighty grip on the collar of the panting judge, trying to tear him from the almost suffocated Gamecock. "Jumping a man with his hands tied behind him! Is that the sort of play you give a stranger in Solid City? Is that the conduct you expect honest citizens of this town to countenance?"

A howl of angry reprobation rose among the crowd, and in another moment both the judge and landlord might have suffered for their outrageous conduct, had not a still more startling cry arose.

"Looky yender! Oh, the pity of it! The pritty, sweet-spoken lady! Dead—butchered—an' they're fetchin' her here to ha'nt the p'izen imp as done the work! To hades with Jumpin' Jerry, says Cripple Josey!"

"It's so—on oath—murder—Jumpin' Jerry killed her like he was—let up, durn you!" gasped Judge Baldy, releasing his captive and striving to turn and grapple with the strong-armed soldier.

And then, squatting on the chest of the half-crushed, wholly bewildered Gamecock, George Shanklin held a cocked revolver with its muzzle boring into the skin between his eyes, gasping with little breath but immeasurable determination:

"Han's off! He's my meat! I'll blow him to never-come-back-ag'in the fu'st try to resky the critter!"

There were but few who heard his threat. Fewer still who took the trouble to glance toward the speaker. Not one in all the crowd who made a move to rescue the Gamecock from his present perilous situation.

Four men were slowly advancing along the street, bearing a rude litter between them. Their heads were uncovered, their faces pale and hard-set. And as the crowd parted before them, those composing it also uncovered, staring with eager, yet half-frightened eyes at the sheet-covered burden lying on the litter.

Colonel Fletcher released Judge Baldy, who scrambled to his feet and forgot to avenge his injured feelings just then. The crowd slowly closed again behind the litter-bearers, who only paused when they entered the white circle and then gently lowered their burden to the ground. They glanced slowly around, their gaze lingering for an instant on the shape of the fallen Gamecock, then fell back, forming in line, as though they recognized Colonel Fletcher as the minister of justice.

The old soldier hesitated for a breath, shivering with a strange dread which he could hardly have explained, then stepping forward, bending and turning back the white cloth. A face was revealed that had once been human.

He shivered anew, averting his eyes as he replaced the sheet. "You see," gravely uttered Judge Baldy, "that face was once the fairest of the fair, and a suckling child could not have been more innocent, more helpless, less offensive than the poor,

hapless lady who lies there, the victim of worse than murder!"

"Which I charge this durned cuss with killin' of her!" spluttered George Shanklin, still boring with his pistol muzzle, still clutching with one hand at the throat of Jumping Jerry, still squatting with all his weight on the Gamecock's breast.

One moment thus, then—the fat landlord shot through the air, turning a perfect somerset in emptiness, and coming to the ground again in a sitting posture with a shock that drove the wind from his lungs with a snort that almost split his cheeks and nostrils.

And Jumping Jerry was kneeling beside the shrouded figure on the bloodstained litter, one hand turning back the cloth, the other lifted toward heaven so impressively, that none present thought of asking or wondering how his bonds had disappeared.

"As God is my judge, and hears my words now, I swear that this is a vile lie! I swear that my hand is clean, so far as this poor woman is concerned. I never harmed her. I am innocent!"

"I charge him—I see him take her off—in the night!" gasped George Shanklin, too dreadfully shocked to rise just then.

"He is accused of murder, and if he attempts to run, I'll kill him myself, though I hang for it!" sternly cried Judge Baldy, covering the Gamecock with a cocked revolver.

Jumping Jerry stared about him like a man in a dream, so far as appearing to understand the dreadful facts is concerned. He heard the terrible charge. He saw the leveled weapon. He caught the growing muttering among the crowd, and then, with a slow, almost painful effort he regained his feet, his face pale as death, his voice low and weak:

"I surrender, gentlemen, since you demand it. I am innocent. God knows this, if you don't. I never harmed her. It is the work of Perdue Flickinger!"

The last words broke from his lips in mightily changed tones. His eyes flashed, his bowed form drew itself rigidly erect, and he was once more the bold, steel-nerved sport from the Occident.

Judge Baldy gripped him by one arm. Another man—one of those who had assisted in bearing the corpse—held him firmly by the other member. All around him were stern and dark faces, growing harder and darker with the growing thirst for vengeance. Any attempt at escape on his part would not only be in vain, but it would serve to put those deadly passions into active operation—would change the crowd to a mob, the mob to lynchers!

Jumping Jerry knew this as well as though he had heard it put in plain words.

"Gentlemen, as a law-abiding man, I surrender myself for a full and impartial examination on this foul charge. I swear I am innocent, but I hardly expect you to believe my bare word. If there is no false testimony, if only the truth is spoken, I have no fear but what you will fully exonerate me. All I ask is a white man's treatment until I am proven unworthy that consideration."

"Which you shall have, or I'll know the reason why!" grimly supplemented Colonel Fletcher, recovering from his consternation, looking and acting like a man of business now.

"Stick it out, sonny! The lyers 'll git you cl'ar, says Cripple Josey!" sung out that cracked voice, supplemented by a cunning chuckle as Peg-leg stumped a little closer to the ring.

He might have meant well—doubtless he did, remembering how the Gamecock from Sundown had interfered to save him from the clutches of Consumptive Johnny on that recent occasion, but Cripple Josey struck an unlucky chord then. A howl of fierce objection rose from the crowd.

"No lawyers! No skullduggery! Judge Lynch is good enough for us! And a rope is better! Hang the bloody cuss first, then try him! Down with him! All together, lads!"

Not in one voice nor in a connected manner as recorded here, but in sharp, explosive sentences that ran from side to side, each a little hotter and more vicious than the one preceding it, until the words were blended with and drowned by a yell for blood that filled the air and drowned all other sounds.

Bold and defiant, Jumping Jerry faced the mob, his eyes flashing, his face pale but fearless. Stern and menacing the colonel stood beside him, pistols out and ready for hot work in case of necessity. And Judge Baldy and George Shanklin, with one or two others from the most steady and reasonable of the crowd, looked ready to withstand the mad rush, should matters come to the worst.

Their lips showed that they were speaking, though not a syllable could be distinguished in that mad uproar. Their half-raised weapons were even more eloquent, however, and though the fierce, savage cry for blood gained volume rather than lost it, the mob seemed to lack a leader with nerve enough to rush upon almost certain death. One step forward would have sufficed, just then. But it meant death to the man who made it.

Cripple Josey seemed cowed by the furious storm his cracked voice had invoked, and was humbly limping away, meekly insinuating himself through the close-drawn ranks, when a rude hand caught him and gave him a backward shove.

That was enough. Other hands snatched at the cripple, other shoves were given, until at length a united effort sent him spinning into the white circle, staggering, his peg-leg plowing up the ground, his arms flying wildly to restore his balance.

"It's a durned shame, says Cripple Josey!" he spluttered, indignantly, as he swayed to and fro. "It's a p'izen—"

His voice broke off with a strange sound, and he seemed to shiver and his whole frame to cower and contract as a sharp, wild voice cried out from the darkness beyond the crowd:

"What is it? What lovely spectacle have you here, good people?"

"It's my gal—come fer her pore ol' daddy, says Cripple Josey!" muttered the old man as he shuffled toward the spot from whence the voice proceeded.

"Quit yer scrowdgin', durn ye!" growled a big fellow whom Cripple Josey strove to push aside that he might leave the cleared space. "Git back, Josey, or I'll knock yer clean into the middle o' next month!"

Cripple Josey staggered back, tripped and fell heavily. Before he could regain his feet, Ora Barcus entered the circle and sprang to the side of the corpse, tearing away the sheet and laughing wildly, hysterically, as she pointed with one hand to the frightfully mutilated face, the other turned toward her own wildly beautiful features.

"Look, George! Compare the two together—her face and mine! Look and tell me which is the prettiest! Which one would you rather press to your heart now? Which, George? Your wife—ay! I heard you call her that, George, that black and awful night! I heard you say you loved her best of all—that you would flee far away together, and never see me again! I saw you kiss her as she clung to your bosom—to my bosom, you perjured traitor!"

She sprang to her feet, her black eyes growing red with the fires of insanity, fixed on the cowering form of Cripple Josey!

Jumping Jerry stared wildly, keenly at the cripple, and as his eyes detected a peculiar fact, he uttered a cry of warning:

"Look out! stop that impostor! Cripple Josey is Perdue Flickinger, and the real assassin! Stop him if—"

The supposed cripple leaped to his feet, casting aside the wooden leg which Jumping Jerry caught him unbuckling. Each hand clasped a revolver, out of which streamed fire and lead, opening a pathway before him, into which he leaped, unheeding the cries and groans of his victims as he plunged on, shooting, snarling, cursing, laughing, all in a breath.

And then—Colonel Fletcher leaped forward, his right arm reaching out. A single shot, and Cripple Josey, with a horrible screech, spun round and round, his last shot speeding up toward the heavens, then he plunged headlong just in the edge of the shadow.

With her hands clasping her throbbing temples, Ora Barcus stared bewilderedly at this startling scene. Then, as Cripple Josey fell as described, an agonized shriek parted her livid lips, and she ran swiftly to the side of the fallen impostor, throwing herself upon his body, turning his pain and rage distorted face upward, pressing her lips to his.

"George—my husband!" murmured the poor girl, between her frantic kisses upon those lips, so unresponsive to her caresses. "It is your little Ora that calls you! Wake up—there is such a strange look in your dear eyes! It frightens me, George! Frightens me, your bold eaglet, as you call me! George—she is gone, and we will never be troubled by her again. I am glad of it, though I was so foolish as to feel jealous of her painted face and padded figure! Jealous! Look at her, George, and then at me. Compare our faces, and say which one is the most perfect, the most lovely and loving! I did it, George—I did it so she would be ugly and hideous in your sight!"

Breathlessly the crowd watched, breathlessly they listened, a gleam of the horrible truth penetrating even the most sluggish mind among them all. It was no mystery now how the woman came to her death!

"She's crazy—she don't know what she says!" muttered Jumping Jerry, in grave, awe-stricken tones. "That devil in human shape did the bloody deed, and it has crazed the poor child!"

Ora Barcus was once more fondling and caressing the irresponsible body, but as the warm blood that poured from his cloven heart wet her hand, she started back with a low shriek, staring at her reddened palm.

One glance at those pale features, on which the shaggy beard now set awry, told her the truth, and a piercing scream parted her livid lips as she dropped upon his body.

But it was only for a moment. She seemed to hear the hasty advance of the colonel, who wished to lend her the aid she so sorely needed, and rising to her knees, with one arm protecting

her dead, the other hand clasp- ing a cocked revolver, she cried out desperately:

"Back, you devils! He is mine—what you have left of him! Back, I say, or I'll kill—kill as long as my poor arm can strike!"

The colonel faltered, then halted. Not through personal fear, for just then his whole mind was devoted to that poor crazed creature.

"She'll kill herself, I'm afraid!" he muttered, in guarded tones. "She's crazy and don't know what she says or does! If some one could only creep up behind her and catch her hand before she could do herself harm!"

A hard, unnatural laugh broke from the poor girl, as though her hearing, preternaturally sharpened, had caught his meaning, for she cried:

"Keep back, you bloodhounds! You have murdered him—murdered my love, my all! Isn't that enough? Would you mutilate his poor body? Would you hang a dead man? It was not death he feared, my darling! It was only the shame of the rope, of the hangman's touch that could chill his blood and dim the ardor of his eyes—eyes the most beautiful that ever shone in mortal head! Eyes that I loved so tenderly! Eyes—poor eyes!" and with a sobbing cry she tenderly covered them over with one little hand. "They are dim, now, for they are full of dust!"

"We must get that pistol from her hands," murmured Colonel Fletcher in the ear of Jumping Jerry, whose arms were now no longer grasped by those who had accused him of this horrible deed. "She as yet hardly realizes his death. When she does—"

No need to complete the sentence. Scarce a person present but had the same belief; that Ora Barcus would kill herself as soon as she could fully realize the death of Cripple Josey.

"She'll never permit any one to approach her near enough to catch her hand," responded Jumping Jerry in the same guarded tones. "If we had a lasso—it looks rough, but better than to stand by and witness her self-murder!"

"There's a rope in the house that may answer," muttered Colonel Fletcher. "I'll try and get it, if you'll stop here and do what you can to save the poor child!"

He stole cautiously away, a furtive glance showing him that Ora Barcus was watching his movements suspiciously; Jumping Jerry also saw her gaze was averted from him, and silently slipped a little nearer the spot where she knelt—only to pause hastily as her pistol covered him and her voice rang out sharply, viciously:

"Stop! one inch nearer, and you die! I know you, you cunning bloodhound! It was you he feared the most, for he knew you came sneaking here to give him up to the gallows! But he has escaped you, devil! He is beyond the reach of the rope, now! He is dead—My God!"

That word seemed to tell her the truth, to clear her poor, crazed brain, and with a wild cry she thrust the muzzle of the revolver against her bosom, pulling trigger just as Jumping Jerry leaped swiftly forward and caught her hand.

"Too late, bloodhound!" she gasped, with a smile of triumph, then falling forward on the body of Cripple Josey—the masked chief—Perdue Flickinger, the fugitive from justice!

CHAPTER XX.

GIVEN TO THE VULTURES.

JUMPING JERRY swiftly reversed the captured pistol, and flashed it before the faces of the excited men who were crowding in upon them, his voice ringing out sharp and clear:

"Back, you idiots! Give her a show, if there's a spark of life remaining! Back, and give her air, or I'll—"

He did not complete the threat, for it was not necessary. The men fell back as though moved by a single will and one pair of legs.

Warned by the pistol-shot, Colonel Fletcher came running back without stopping for the rope, and as he joined Jumping Jerry, who knelt by the side of Ora Barcus, the Gamecock hurriedly whispered:

"She's alive, and may be able to tell all before death comes. If not—look after Cripple Josey, and don't let any person, no matter what their claims, take him out of your sight. My very life may depend upon it!"

The ex-cavalryman bowed, but said nothing in words. It was needless. Jumping Jerry knew that he could trust the veteran.

The Gamecock glanced up, running his eyes over the crowd.

"Is there a doctor among you, gentlemen? If so, let him come here."

A man was already pressing through the close ranks; the same whom we last saw in attendance on Albino Dave two nights before. He knelt beside the poor girl, and made a hasty examination. He whispered to the Gamecock, who as hurriedly responded in the same guarded tones. Then Jumping Jerry tenderly, carefully lifted Ora Barcus in his arms, and with the doctor making a passage for him through the crowd, carried her to the Palace. And there, on the same bed which Mrs. Flickinger occupied when her long-lost husband came to visit her, the wounded girl was placed, to breathe out her last moments of life.

For such was the word that had gone forth. Living, but dying. It was long odds against her ever recovering her consciousness before the

flickering light went out forever. And that one faint chance lay in her being left in absolute silence.

So the doctor said, and when Jumping Jerry added his persuasions, the excited yet awed citizens gradually melted away from about the Palace. The more readily, perhaps, that they remembered Cripple Josey was lying in or near the Pit. They knew there was some sort of secret connected with him. If not, why his playing the part of a cripple so long and cunningly? Why had Jumping Jerry charged him with being Perdue Flickinger, and a murderer? Why had poor Ora called him George? And all that wild talk about "bloodhounds" and the hangman?

On a faro-table in the gambling portion of The Pit, a body lay on its back, with limbs decently composed and face covered. The garb was enough to tell those who gathered around that the remains were those of "Cripple Josey."

Near the corpse, side by side, stood Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown and Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher. Both were grave and stern in face, and as the sport from the Occident spoke, his tones, though low and even, were hard as fate itself.

He gave a brief, but clear sketch of the past recorded against Perdue Flickinger.

An escaped murderer. A thief, swindler, confidence-man, road-agent, assassin; all these charges were brought against Perdue Flickinger. And as the Gamecock paused for a moment before adducing the final proof that Cripple Josey was indeed the runaway from justice, Judge Theobald Stopover moved a pace in front of the other listeners, and said:

"Nearly all of this, and much which my learned—I should say, the gentleman from Sundown—has placed before this assembly of the solid men of Solid City, was recently confided to my keeping as her lawyer by the murdered lady. She came here expecting to find her husband, one Perdue Flickinger. She applied to me to find him for her, and to give me all necessary aid, she told me his past career. She painted it even blacker than this assembly of the gentleman from Sunset has done."

"Did she say no more?" sharply interjected Jumping Jerry, a sudden glitter filling his blue eyes. "Did she give no positive clue by which he might be recognized? No peculiar mark or—stop!" he cried, with an imperious wave of his hand that brought the opening lips of the judge together again with a sharp smack.

Jumping Jerry cast a swift glance around at the interested faces, cold and grave once more. He spoke deliberately:

"Gentlemen, I have been accused with being a murderer. I have been called Perdue Flickinger on more than one occasion. I am neither the one nor the other. I charge this dead man now lying before us with being both. And I think I can prove my words true beyond a doubt!"

"You, judge, know that the original and only Perdue Flickinger carried a peculiar birthmark on his left breast. In the interests of justice and common humanity will you please write down a brief description of that mark? I will do the same, and then we will both hand the papers to an impartial judge, who will hold them while the breast of the corpse is laid bare to public view."

It was done. Colonel Fletcher held the two slips of paper, and with his free hand uncovered the breast of Cripple Josey. On the now blood-stained bosom could be seen the representation of a red spider.

"It is the same mark as described in each one of the papers I hold in my hands," gravely uttered Colonel Fletcher, after carefully examining the peculiar blemish. "There can be no further doubt as to the facts; the person we have known so long as Cripple Josey, is in reality Perdue Flickinger."

In silence Jumping Jerry removed the cunningly made and worn disguise of wig and beard. Then, despite the stains, the wrinkles so cunningly painted, the pain and rage distorted features, all who looked could see what a close resemblance there was between the faces of the dead and the living man.

"That was it—an' I'm a durned old bleary-eyed idjit!" spluttered George Shanklin. "It was him I see taking the pore lady out o' the Palace that night! Ef he wasn't dead a'ready, it'd do me a mighty heap good to jes' cuss him a few!"

"And it was our mutual friend's information on this point that led me into the awful mistake of charging you with her death, my dear sir," added Judge Theobald Stopover, taking the Gamecock's hand between both of his and pressing it warmly. "I take it all back. I ask your pardon. I'm a fool. You can kick me for saying what I did, if you like!"

Never mind just what followed. It was a regular "love feast," as one enthusiastic citizen afterward declared, though the Gamecock escaped from the crowd as soon as he possibly could.

He was anxious to learn the fate of Ora Barcus.

The doctor was right. The poor girl regained

her senses before death, and lived long enough to make a full explanation.

Solid City never knew all that she revealed during that death-hour, nor is it necessary to have it in detail.

Enough that Ora Barcus knew that "Cripple Josey" was a fugitive from justice. Her own life had not been wholly without blame, perhaps, from her feeble ravings in the final moments; but never mind that.

She did not know that Cripple Josey was Perdue Flickinger until that memorable Sunday night, though she recognized in the photograph showed her by "Miss Maud Vernon" a resemblance of her love, when his face was undisguised. That fact awakened her suspicions, and finally led her on to death.

She saw "George" enter the Palace, and filled with jealousy she watched and waited until he came forth again. She followed him out of town, dogging him until he came back with a man and two horses. She heard him bid that man await his return, and she sought concealment close at hand. Thus it was that she saw and heard Perdue Flickinger in conversation with his wife. And what she saw and heard then turned her brain to fire.

She could not clearly describe what followed. She only remembered spending a night and day in the mountains, hunting, hunting, until she was almost worn out with fatigue and hunger and wild emotion. Then—she found Mrs. Perdue Flickinger, confined in a rude cabin back in the hills. And—

A little band of prospectors chanced upon the lone cabin, and made the frightful discovery. The hapless woman was dead, though her body was still warm. It was plainly a most atrocious murder, and while two of their number hastened to Solid City with the news, the others shut up the cabin and waited with weapons in hand for the return of help.

The messengers chanced on Judge Stopover first, and he immediately surmised the truth, for he was already growing uneasy at the long absence of his fair client. He went to the Palace to make sure she had not returned, and then, with George Shanklin, he hastened to the scene of the tragedy.

He recognized the corpse, despite the fact that its face had been cut and slashed out of all comeliness. And when George Shanklin repeated his account of how Mrs. Perdue Flickinger had left the Palace, it was not hard to guess who had committed this atrocious deed. So the body was carried back to Solid City, and Jumping Jerry charged with being the assassin.

It was just dawn when word spread through Solid City that poor Ora Barcus was dead.

The sun was just rising when the corpse of Perdue Flickinger was drawn from the ground by a rope around his neck, and then left dangling and swaying in the morning breeze, a prey for the vultures.

His record cleared, Jumping Jerry did not see fit to confide his whole purpose in hunting out Perdue Flickinger to the public in general, although he made it known to a chosen few, one of whom, as a matter of course, was Colonel Marmaduke Fletcher.

He was only an amateur detective, hunting down the scoundrel who had basely slain a particular friend, "a side pard" of his.

Jumping Jerry, his main end gained, declared his intention to bid adieu to Solid City, but Colonel Fletcher begged him to remain; and so it was finally decided. Jerry took a half-interest in the establishment, and from that day to this the firm has prospered. They each hold up for the famous black-reds, and many a bit of choice sport have they witnessed in that little back cockpit.

Albino Dave, really a gentleman—"white at heart as he was of hair and face." Jumping Jerry used to say, laughingly—did not long hold a grudge against his treble conqueror, and returned to his position of fare dealer, though his fingers were never quite so nimble as of yore. Still, "that don't count, for we run a square game at The Pit, you know, my lad!"

Moses Redheffer returned to Last Chance—on foot! He "alays did admire walkin'!" One day, when his body was as wholly healed as his mind, he came back to Solid City and got gloriously drunk in drinking the health of the Gamecock from Sundown. With tears streaming from his eyes, he begged Jumping Jerry's pardon time and again for being such a cussed mule as to mix him up with a dirty whelp like Perdue Flickinger.

Judge Theobald Stopover, after due consultation with Jumping Jerry and the colonel, put on his best clothes and journeyed to Philadelphia, seeking the friends or relatives of the hapless woman who had sought his services in the far-away mining-camp. He found them. And with full instructions and plenty of money, he returned to Solid City.

The next stage carried with it a heavy wooden box, directed to Philadelphia. And so Mrs. Perdue Flickinger went home.

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